

Consultant, Coach, or Confidant?

As organizational leaders, we all have seasons where we would appreciate an outside perspective. It's sometimes difficult to admit we need help, but we also know we cannot be experts in every challenge our evolving organization will face. We may wonder if we are on the right track strategically, or question whether we are missing something when making a difficult decision. There are circumstances where we simply don't have much experience. And sometimes, we just don't know what we don't know. Today, the terms *consultant* and *coach* are too often used interchangeably. Yet technically, they each have very distinct purposes with different approaches. Then again, there are times all we really want is someone to just listen – a trusted *confidant*.

Consultant

The concept of “consulting” is the most straight forward type of outside advice. You have a specific challenge and you seek the counsel of an expert. In essence, you want someone to tell you what to do given their experience. What would *they* do, if in your shoes? A consultant is sought who has expertise in your particular area of interest. Attorneys and CPAs can serve as consultants in their fields, but there are also those with unique expertise in Human Resources, Information Technology, Change Management, Process Improvement, Strategic Planning, Organization Development, Sales Process, Mergers & Acquisitions, Board Governance, etc. No matter what your topic, most likely there is a consultant who specializes in that area. It is often desirable to find a consultant who is also familiar with your particular industry or type of organization.

Consultants can be very hands-on within your organization or used for advice only. For example, an IT or HR consultant may literally do much of the work for you, such as system implementations or certain employee services. Yet as the term suggests, consultants are primarily “consulted” for their perspective, and it is up to the leader to take their advice or not.

Their Value: *Specific expertise.*

Leader's Mindset: *“Given your experience – what would you advise me to do?”*

Coach

The idea of “coaching” for organizational leaders has recently gotten quite popular. There are consultants who now also offer coaching services, and there are those who specialize specifically in executive or leadership coaching. Sports coaches don't play on the field – but they do tell people what to do! By contrast, in this use of the term coaching they also do not play on the field (in the organization), but their role is *not* to tell leaders what to do. Their expertise is more around “process” and to ask probing, candid questions to the leader. The goal is to allow the leader to come to their own conclusions, making their own decisions. The coach is skilled at helping to “clear the fog” around what

may be hindering the leader's perspective or decision making. The coach isn't necessarily an expert in a particular area of your organization – but an expert in guiding you in how to best think through a topic or dilemma.

Their Value: *Probing questions and offering perspectives that help clear the fog.*

Leader's Mindset: *"How should I be thinking about this?"*

Confidant

In reality, sometimes the most valued relationship for an organizational leader is someone we are able to candidly bear our soul to. We may not necessarily be looking for answers, but simply sharing thoughts with someone we trust. They may have lived in our shoes, able to relate to our challenges – or maybe not. Most importantly, they are gifted listeners more than advice-givers. These honest conversations frequently take place over coffee, lunch, or happy hour.

This relationship should not be underestimated. We are often more comfortable bearing all with a trusted friend than with a consulting or coaching professional. Having access to someone who is genuinely "there for you" makes all the difference when working through personal and professional challenges.

Their Value: *Being there for you.*

Leader's Mindset: *"I want a trusted friend to just listen, to openly talk things out."*

In Summary

Seek a consultant when requiring expertise around a particular challenge, topic, or decision. They should have relevant experience, so you value their perspective and advice. (Seeking advice on what you should *Do*) A coach is your best bet when you are not actually looking for answers as much as working through a process together. The coach has expertise in questioning and coaching skills but may not have experience in your specific type of organization or challenge. (Seeking advice on how you should *Think*) A confidant is one of your trusted friends. They know and care about you, and allow you to bear your soul. (Seeking someone who will always *Be There* for you)

I am often asked if one person can ever successfully fulfill all three roles for a leader. Sure. Rare, but yes. Though consultants have expertise in a particular area they could serve as your coach in other areas, if they are skilled in questioning and coaching methods. As your relationship and trust grows, that same person may also become a friend and confidant to brainstorm with or just to listen. But to avoid confusion (and frustration), you both must agree on which "hat" that person will be wearing at any given point in time.

Michael Wilkes & Company specializes in management consulting and leadership team development for closely-held businesses, churches, and nonprofit organizations challenged by the necessary leadership transitions due to growth or strategic change. For further information: www.michaelwilkesco.com