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Great People or Great Companies: Who Do You Hire?

When selecting consultants, service providers, or advisors, are you making decisions based on the quality of the company or strength of the people who will lead your project to success? Ask yourself that question again. The company or the people?

When engaging outside companies to provide services, the first order of business for many executives is often to select a list of companies that offer the services they seek. They review corporate brochures and client lists of each contender, and they read proposals and work hard to stay awake through PowerPoint presentations in darkened rooms. They ask questions and hold second and third interviews, they check references, negotiate business terms, and they eventually select a company to work on their project.

But, what are the real criteria people use to select others to whom they'll entrust important and mission critical projects? Is the selection process about corporate track record, about who closed the largest deal last year, about who advises more companies in a given industry, or about who fielded the largest team at the presentation? Some will say that such selections are often based on relationships. Does that mean that executives are incapable of making selections that are based on the needs of their companies and will only select those people they like?

When an executive interviews service provider candidates, does he or she take everything they say as gospel? Doesn't the executive need to believe what the candidate says as truthful? If the executive doesn't trust that the candidate has the experience, the horsepower, or the resources to accomplish the required task, would that candidate likely win the project? After the executive engages the service provider, who will complete the project, the company or the people who work there? Do people really engage companies or do they engage other people?

The answer is PEOPLE! Yes, people! Ok, while you're not surprised at the answer, ask yourself a question. Does your company spend more time qualifying the companies it hires or the people who will be the key to your projects' success? On the surface, most companies deploy a company-to- process and believe that the people who work there must be qualified if they're associated with a well-known, large, or respected company.

Here's a question for you: Is EVERYONE in your organization the absolute best in your industry? While your company may have a reputation for excellence, might certain people in your own organization be better suited for some projects versus others? So, when you engage a company to advise you, if you're using a company focused selection process, how can you be certain that you'll get the people who are best qualified to successfully complete your project? The answer is: With a company-to-company selection process only, you can't!

Now, let's get real. If companies didn't matter then, the world would be full of sole practitioner consultants and large companies would disappear, right? Very large and complex projects, and those requiring significant capital resources, require the strength, reputation, and support of major powerhouse advisors. While we'd all like to think that our projects are the biggest, most important, and most complex in the entire universe, prudent business people must ask themselves the questions:

- How will we benefit by engaging the largest and most prominent service providers to accomplish our mission?
- Are we too large for small companies to advise us on our terms?
- Are our requirements truly too complex or too involved to be adequately serviced by a small service provider?
- Are we too small for the biggest name in the business to provide us the personal service we deserve?
- Will we get lost in the shuffle of a large company's important clients?
- Would we be better served as a big fish in a small pond or will we be the guppies among whales?

The most common mistake companies make in selecting consultants, service providers, or advisors, is in *not* requesting specific information about the people that will work on the project... "ALL" of the people. Many service providers will fill a room with a brigade of "highly qualified team members" who are there to lend their expertise to the project on an as needed basis, and will often bring senior company officials and even the President of the company himself, to show how important the client is to them. While that always makes people feel important, it says nothing about the people who will actually be responsible for the project's success.

Large service providers like to say that their methodology is the key their value and that when you engage them, you get the whole company, their intellectual technology, and their ability to add and remove people from your project team as needed. Ok, so your project, the one that's going to take your company to new, higher levels of growth and profitability, and the one that could make (*or, break!*) your career and that of others, will be entrusted to a group of nameless, faceless corporate characters, who may fade in and out of your project over time? Does that suggest continuity in your project? Does that make sense? Does that feel right?

The success of your project will depend on the experience, creativity, knowledge, dedication, and commitment of people who understand your needs and recognize your company's objectives. Their ability to bring "best practices" in planning viable alternatives, solving your company's problem, and executing profitable solutions, is tantamount to the size of their company. To select the right people for your project, consider the following:

- Engage people who work at great companies, don't just hire great companies
- Request specific experience and information on the people who will serve you
- Check references on the people who will work on your project and thoroughly investigate their individual track records and experience
- Determine how you think and feel about each of the individuals, and ask yourself:
 - Are they knowledgeable and sharp?
 - Could they carry your project on their own, if they had to?
 - Are they passionate about their work?
 - Will they dedicate themselves to your project, or be involved in too many others?
 - Can you trust them to get the job done on your terms?

Create your list of companies who you believe are uniquely qualified in the areas your project requires. Make certain that they offer the internal expertise and external reputations you seek. Check the track records of both their companies and their people, and make sure that they fit into your company's way of conducting business and can truly support your objectives. Then, after all of that's been done, make sure you've got the right people for the job. Hiring a great company with the wrong people can be a nightmare, and can derail the simplest of projects slowly, painfully, and expensively.

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