Vendor vs. Partner

Two Ways Leaders Can Relate to an Advisor

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*One of the most telling measures of an advisor's relationship with a leader isn't the quality of the methodology used or even the depth of the practitioner's expertise. It's whether the leader relates to the practitioner as a **vendor** or as a **partner**.*

In a vendor relationship, the interaction is transactional and the practitioner is treated largely as an expendable resource: useful for a defined task, but replaceable if the leader should become uncomfortable for any reason. In a partner relationship, there's a close alliance built on shared goals and mutual dependence. The leader and the advisor are bound together by their mutual commitment to the outcome, not just the contract.

These aren't just different relationship styles. They produce fundamentally different working conditions, and those conditions directly shape the practitioner's ability to generate value. The full ATA paper "Vendor vs. Partner" explores how this single distinction shapes what practitioners can accomplish and what leaders are willing to invest. Here are some highlights.

How Leaders Behave Differently

A clear contrast shows up in how leaders treat the practitioners they engage. The table below illustrates how different a relationship can look depending on which mode is in play.

A Leader Who Sees a Vendor…	A Leader Who Sees a Partner…
Views the practitioner as interchangeable with other available options	Views the practitioner as a distinctive resource worth protecting and investing in
Expects fast, cheap results and questions anything that seems complex or costly	Accepts that the most effective path to realization may demand significant time, effort, and resources
Pushes back on guidance, expects the practitioner to solve problems independently, and stays largely disengaged	Actively draws on the practitioner's experience and stays involved in working through problems together
Limits access, assigns work outside the practitioner's specialty, and resists views that don't align with preexisting assumptions	Keeps the practitioner close, guards against distractions, and welcomes candid perspectives even when challenging

How Practitioners See Themselves Differently

The vendor-partner distinction applies equally to how practitioners view themselves. A practitioner's self-perception shapes the kind of value they believe they're capable of delivering, and that belief governs nearly every decision they make in the relationship. The full Vendor/Partner paper shows how these self-perceptions play out in practice through the contrasts listed in the table below.

A Practitioner Who Sees Themselves as a Vendor…	A Practitioner Who Sees Themselves as a Partner…
Zeroes in on installation and treats it as the end goal	Treats installation as a necessary but insufficient step toward full realization
Limits feedback to what the leader is comfortable hearing	Provides everything the leader needs to hear to achieve realization, regardless of comfort
Minimizes risk visibility and keeps a positive spin on progress	Identifies and surfaces substantive risks early so mitigation can begin
Promises whatever the leader wants, even if it isn't feasible	Agrees on realization outcomes only after an honest assessment of aspirations against real inhibitors

It's a Continuum, Not a Category

Most leader-practitioner relationships aren't purely "vendor" or "partner." They blend qualities of each depending on the situation, and both parties move along the resulting continuum as circumstances shift. However, one side tends to be dominant, and that dominance matters.

Vendor relationships aren’t inherently wrong. For tactical, low-risk, straightforward advisory work, they’re often entirely appropriate. But for strategic, complex, high-stakes initiatives where full realization is what the leader has committed to, only a partner relationship provides the foundation a leader needs.

The implication is clear: Leaders and advisors need to define how they’re going to work together before the work begins. Setting those expectations early and revisiting them periodically is what makes realization possible. The paper closes with guidance on how to achieve that.

This paper is drawn from the Conner Academy Advisor Training Academy (ATA) curriculum. To explore the full program, visit conneracademy.com.

