

# From Vendor to Partner:

Maximizing your agency relationship

Tanesha Smith-Wattley

Head of Product & Delivery

**VERY GOOD VENTURES**

EVERYBODY  
LOVES  
CONSULTANTS



From Vendor to Partner

## Building Trust-filled Partnerships

I was so excited to win this wildcard speaker spot but then I thought, hang on...



## Why the high interest in this topic?

Not all agencies are terrible, but all people have had terrible experiences with agencies.

Let's unpack it **together**.

From Vendor to Partner

## **Let's play a quick round of mythbusters**

**They probably want to steal my job**

## Let's play a quick round of mythbusters

### **They probably want to steal my job**

Most consultants *like* consulting and the variety that it provides. Use the benefit of their many many "reps" to fast-track your productivity and validate your ideas.

## From Vendor to Partner

# Let's play a quick round of mythbusters

**They probably want to steal my job**

Most consultants *like* consulting and the variety that it provides. Use the benefit of their many many “reps” to fast-track your productivity and validate your ideas.

**What if they make me look bad in front of my boss?**

## From Vendor to Partner

# Let's play a quick round of mythbusters

**They probably want to steal my job**

Most consultants *like* consulting and the variety that it provides. Use the benefit of their many many “reps” to fast-track your productivity and validate your ideas.

**What if they make me look bad in front of my boss?**

They want to *make you look good*! Cultivating a great relationship with YOU means that when you need help in the future or at your *next* company, you'll think of them first.

## From Vendor to Partner

# Let's play a quick round of mythbusters

**They probably want to steal my job**

Most consultants *like* consulting and the variety that it provides. Use the benefit of their many many “reps” to fast-track your productivity and validate your ideas.

**What if they make me look bad in front of my boss?**

They want to *make you look good*! Cultivating a great relationship with YOU means that when you need help in the future or at your *next* company, you'll think of them first.

**Won't they just toss around a bunch of buzz words to sound smart?**



## From Vendor to Partner

# Let's play a quick round of mythbusters

**They probably want to steal my job**

Most consultants *like* consulting and the variety that it provides. Use the benefit of their many many “reps” to fast-track your productivity and validate your ideas.

**What if they make me look bad in front of my boss?**

They want to *make you look good*! Cultivating a great relationship with YOU means that when you need help in the future or at your *next* company, you'll think of them first.

**Won't they just toss around a bunch of buzz words to sound smart?**

Great partners get into *your* groove, aligning to and *respecting* your language, acronyms, and culture.

## From Vendor to Partner

# Let's play a quick round of mythbusters

**They probably want to steal my job**

Most consultants *like* consulting and the variety that it provides. Use the benefit of their many many “reps” to fast-track your productivity and validate your ideas.

**What if they make me look bad in front of my boss?**

They want to *make you look good*! Cultivating a great relationship with YOU means that when you need help in the future or at your *next* company, you'll think of them first.

**Won't they just toss around a bunch of buzz words to sound smart?**

Great partners get into *your* groove, aligning to and *respecting* your language, acronyms, and culture.

**They'll suggest a bunch of unnecessary  
 to drive the bill up.**

## From Vendor to Partner

# Let's play a quick round of mythbusters

**They probably want to steal my job**

Most consultants *like* consulting and the variety that it provides. Use the benefit of their many many "reps" to fast-track your productivity and validate your ideas.

**What if they make me look bad in front of my boss?**

They want to *make you look good*! Cultivating a great relationship with YOU means that when you need help in the future or at your *next* company, you'll think of them first.

**Won't they just toss around a bunch of buzz words to sound smart?**

Great partners get into *your* groove, aligning to and *respecting* your language, acronyms, and culture.

**They'll suggest a bunch of unnecessary  
 to drive the bill up.**

Any solution put forward should be *real and deliverable* full stop. Healthy growth scales organically and strategically and most important – *collaboratively*.

Scene 1

**“It helps to start at the end”**

## Scene 1: “It Helps to Start at the End”

# Define Outcomes, Not Just Deliverables

### The Goal

Deliver a new checkout flow by Memorial Day.

### The Problem

Every decision, feature, or pixel seems to come with extra dollar signs and an extended timeline.

**Stop me if you’ve heard this one before:**

**You:** We’ll need to add push notifications

**Agency:** Sure no problem, but we’ll need to add another design round  
...and another designer

**You:** Wait, what?!

**Agency:** Well, that’s out of scope 🙄



Are you making an checkout flow or playing Simon Says? *Every screen feels like a high-stakes negotiation.*



Costs are ballooning fast and launch day? *Please.*



Not to mention trust is eroding by the minute. *Sound familiar?*

## Scene 1: “It Helps to Start at the End”

# Where It Went Wrong: The Transactional Start

Even when spelled out in black and white, the words on a contract can leave a lot of room for misinterpretation.

- Sounds like this one was built for a vendor relationship—not a partnership.
- The agency was given marching orders but **no real insight** into **why** any given feature matters and the impact it will have on your users.
- The **focus was on outputs** (deliverables), not outcomes (business success).

## Scene 1: “It Helps to Start at the End”

# Fix: Look for a Partner, Not Just an Executor

If we rewind and set this up for mutual success:

The agency is aligned to your business goals.

What are the key user behaviors or flows that will drive your product success?

Hypothetical example: You work for an ecommerce site and have determined that new users who place 5 orders in 90 days have an increased LTV of 20% on average.

The contract includes room for iteration

No one nails it right out of the gate. User discovery and insights will continue to evolve over time.

You need room to adjust as you learn more. That LTV gain is worth building in a few nudges and prompts in the journey for users who've gone idle.

Pivots happen deliberately, not through guesses or assumptions

In the face of compelling data insights or critical user gaps – we adjust to new information with intention and confidence.

Accounting of course for any necessary trade-offs that may be made to accommodate them.

Costs are predictable, not a constant surprise party

Weekly rates or monthly maximums are just a few of many ways to stop the nickel and diming. Not to mention that “value” and “currency” do not always have to translate to forking over cash.

Consider co-marketing activities like case studies, podcast participation, logo usage, testimonials, and more... *get creative!*

Scene 2

**“Ready, Fire, Aim!”**



## Scene 2: “Ready. Aim. Fire!”

# Now things seem better—until they aren’t

### The Situation

The agency is now embedded, working as a partner.

### The Problem

Suddenly, there’s internal drag and friction.

### What happened?

- The copywriters are slammed and can’t devote any time to your effort.
- The engineering team is forcing tech stack changes mid-project.
- You secured budget for another designer but their very necessary system access is stuck in a procurement swirl.



The **agency’s hands are tied**, blocked by bureaucratic bottlenecks.



**Work slows down** as velocity has all but ground to a halt.



Once again, you’re **not getting value**, and **frustration builds**.

## Scene 2: “Readt. Fire. Aim!”

# Where It Went Wrong: No one planned for execution realities

The most solid, airtight plan can still fall apart if no one maps out how it will actually come to life.

- The team greenlit a plan without resourcing the work.

While the overall strategy was sound, the people responsible for actually *doing it* didn't have the capacity (or context) to execute.

- Everyone assumed alignment, no one verified it.

Kickoff was enthusiastic, but the day-to-day flow hit snags with assumptions and competing priorities, not real coordination.

- Key dependencies weren't surfaced until too late.

That “quick fix” turned out to rely on backend work, complex analytics tagging, or a reworked customer journey—touching on departments who weren't involved in the original scoping.

- No shared definition of “done.” (DOD)

One team's definition of completion didn't match another's — QA sent it back with bugs, The Product Manager said ship it, while the designers were still tweaking...

## Scene 2: “Ready. Fire. Aim!”

### Fix:

If we rewind and set this up for mutual success:

#### Map the total ecosystem

What might you discover – and get ahead of – if you truly take the time to visually plot the directly affected groups and players to pull off your plan?

Taking a birds-eye view of your org can help you to understand it as a *system*. Don’t forget to add your agency partners into the mix to paint a full picture.

#### Define blockers and dependencies

Cross-departmental partners with competing roadmaps of their own may have little to no time for your project needs.

And while the words blockers and dependencies carry somewhat negative connotations, taking these steps can also surface *opportunities* for solutions.

#### Sequence the work

Now that you’ve identified the players and actions, create an ambitious but informed timeline of *coordinated* hand-offs with built-in feedback loops.

Rather than feeling ambushed or pressured, your internal partners now have a chance to work your ask into their schedules.

#### Socialize. Socialize. Socialize.

Pull your group together and talk through the plan live. It’s important that people have a chance to air any anxieties or trepidation it may surface.

This will allow you to get on the same page with a shared sense of urgency towards the mission.

Co-conspirators are much more fun to work with than adversaries!

Scene 3

**“Who’s the boss?”**

### Scene 3: “Who’s the boss?”

## Define Boundaries, Not Just Buy-In

#### The Situation

The agency is cruising. Teams are delivering. Launch is in your sights.

#### The Problem

Then leadership shows up — midway through with a new priority or simply a new opinion — suddenly, you’re back at square 1.

#### Stop me if you’ve heard this one before:

**You:** We’re finalizing the last user flows this week.

**New SVP:** “Wait — why are we even using this platform?”

**You:** ...because we aligned on it 2 months ago?

**New SVP:** “Yeah, I think we should pivot. Like, entirely.”

**You:** [a single tear falls]

**New SVP:** “Let’s get a new deck together by Friday.”



The team is forced to change direction.



The agency is sidelined and frustrated.



You’ve paid for months of work — and have nothing to show for it.

### Scene 3: “Who’s the boss?”

## Where It Went Wrong: The problem? No alignment at the top.

It wasn’t the agency’s fault. It wasn’t the product team’s fault. It was the slow, silent unraveling of a project without a unified voice at the highest level.

- **Leadership was looped in too late.**  
By the time execs weighed in, major decisions had already been made — and unraveling them meant losing weeks of work.
- **There was no shared north star.**  
Teams aligned to different *interpretations* of success. One exec prioritized brand polish, another wanted to focus on adding AI. Without agreement, every review felt like a reset.
- **No one owned the “big picture.”**  
Each function focused on their part of the puzzle, but no one was actively steering toward the original vision — or protecting it from disruption.
- **Course corrections came without a safety net.**  
Pivots are inevitable. But without a clear escalation path, every change felt reactive, not strategic. No one knew who had final say — or how to move forward without stalling.

## Scene 3: “Who’s the boss?”

# Fix: Secure Executive Buy-In From Day One

If we rewind and set this up for mutual success:

**Leadership is involved at the start — not just at the end**

Anyone who holds veto power needs to be present during kickoff. Otherwise, you’re not launching a project — you’re setting up your C-suite to feel blindsided. Set expectations early about who needs visibility and when.

**There’s a clear escalation path when things go sideways**

When direction shifts or conflicts arise, who gets to “call it”? Having an agreed-upon decision-maker (or small committee) ensures pivots are thoughtful, not panic-fueled. No more leadership whiplash.

**Define the vision once — and protect it**

Your core objective shouldn’t be up for debate every sprint. Document it. Share it. Align on it. That way, when shiny new ideas pop up, teams can ask: Does this move us closer to the goal?

**Give the agency air cover**

Empowered partners make better decisions. Make sure your agency knows you’ve got their back — and that they’re not stuck defending the plan solo when someone new parachutes in with “just one quick question.”

Scene 4

# **“A Successful Partnership”**



## Scene 4: Fast-Forward — A Successful Partnership

### Where It All Comes Together: Trust, Clarity, and Momentum

Now, the agency isn't just hitting deadlines — they're helping drive the business forward.



**Decisions are made  
efficiently with clear  
owners.**



**Adjustments happen  
without bureaucracy.**



**Costs are predictable,  
transparent, and tied to  
business value.**



**The company (and  
customers) feel real  
impact.**

# Key Takeaways: How to Build a True Partnership

- ✓ **Define Outcomes, Not Just Deliverables** → Align on goals, not just tasks.
- ✓ **Plan for Execution Realities** → Surface blockers and dependencies early by checking in with internal teammates.
- ✓ **Clarify Decision-Making Power** → Who are the day-to-day approvers with the authority to “call it”.
- ✓ **Secure Leadership Buy-In** → Avoid last-minute interference from higher ups.
- ✓ **Plan for some buffer** → No industry is immune to strategy shifts or market pressures
- ✓ **Think Long-Term** → Invest in relationships, not just contracts.

## From Vendor to Partner

**A little vulnerability goes a long way.** When people are made aware of your pain points, fears, or anxieties, they can then take your problems on as their own and craft better solutions with you.

So, would you rather have a vendor who follows orders—  
or a partner who **helps you succeed?**

# Thank You!

Tanesha Smith-Wattley

Head of Product & Delivery

**VERY GOOD VENTURES**