

Best Work After Idea Fight Club

Idea In Short

The best consulting work emerges when ideas are tested in constructive tension among trusted peers. Do competent work, structure your thinking, advocate confidently and revise selectively. Ideas get stronger the more they are tested.

The Idea Fight Club Concept

The phrase idea fight club emerged in 2015 during a consulting engagement with an ambiguous client problem. The team had not settled on an approach, and differing ideas sat on the table with their pros and cons. The environment worked because five conditions were met. The team agreed on the goal. The members trusted each other enough to avoid taking offense easily. There was enough time to listen and reflect. A decision maker was present. It was fun to think about the problem. The concept is an homage to the movie but also a simple admission that consultants should be confident in their ideas, backed by data, research and thinking. They should be willing to let their ideas stand the testing of peers, managers and clients. The philosophy is strong opinions, loosely held.

Meaningful Decisions Are Difficult

Hundreds of small decisions arise every day, and for those the right move is to just decide without drama using heuristics. More difficult and meaningful decisions require diverse input, reflection and constructive tension. The easy problems have already been solved. Complex problems have nuanced trade-offs and influence more people than the decision maker alone. Executives earn their compensation because decisions are tough, and the stakes rise with the complexity of the problem. A team that avoids tension in the name of harmony produces weaker analysis. Constructive disagreement is a feature, not a bug, of high-performing consulting teams.

Leaders Are Intellectually Humble

Leaders are learners who surround themselves with smart, trusting people different from themselves. They understand several truths about human limitation. No one can be an expert in everything, and most leaders do not want to be. Everyone has biases and blind spots, and no one is as objective as they would like to believe. Leaders suffer sycophantic behavior constantly, hearing phrases like yes, boss, your idea is great as always. Leaders are too far removed from the customer, the competition and the sale. They understand that complex problems have no simple answers. Intellectual humility creates the conditions where idea fight club can thrive. 1 A leader who admits fallibility invites the team to challenge thinking and improve outcomes.

Everything Sounds Smart in Your Head

No surprise, fledgling ideas sound smart in the warm comfort of our own heads. Those same ideas sound less great when they hit the cold, wet reality of the market. The client's willingness-to-pay, the competitor's next move, cash flow limitations, risk tolerance and even personal confidence all test the idea. Ideas need to be vetted before they face the client. A compelling story illustrates the power of this testing. The founders of Bain and Company first met at Boston Consulting Group (BCG). BCG ran an experiment that divided the company into three teams, color-coded blue, red and green, and had them compete. The experiment worked, perhaps a little too well. The blue team performed best, led by Bill Bain and Patrick Graham. Three years later they left BCG and formed the eponymous Bain and Company. 2 Competition among smart people sharpened their thinking and spawned a new firm.

Ideas Get Stronger When Tested

Consulting teams are smart and diverse. Having a trusted group of critical thinkers, even when their ideas differ from your own, is a powerful accelerant. Test ideas in a safe environment. Beat up on the ideas a little, for the good of the client. Think of it as training for a young Spartan. Think of it as strands of braided wire that get twisted and turned, reinforced and stronger with each iteration. The testing process is not about winning an argument. It is about ensuring the final deliverable can withstand the scrutiny of a skeptical client executive who controls the budget.

Get Competent and Do the Hard Work

It all starts with the quality of your own individual work. Vince Lombardi captured the ethos with several quotations. To achieve success, whatever the job, you must pay a price. Second place is meaningless, and you cannot always be first, but you must believe you should have been and that time just ran out. There is no substitute for work. There is odd satisfaction when you spend hours mulling through data and then create a unique chart. It feels good to dig through the reading and sharpen your understanding of the case. It is refreshing to become a mini-expert on a topic to the point that you can divide the story into buckets. Like Neo in the Matrix, you can see the patterns.

Structure Your Thinking and Advocate

Consultants are paid to help executives with clear thinking and persuasive communications. Can other people follow your logic? If it only makes sense to you, then you have a blog, not a consulting business. It is not enough to do good work and pile it into an 80-page presentation. Do not forget to edit, revise and improve. Once you have done great work, stand up for it. No one will be more confident in your work than you. Be proud. Clients pay for your work and your opinions, so persuade without misleading. 3 Confidence grounded in rigorous analysis is the currency of consulting.

Get Feedback and Revise Selectively

If you are sensitive to criticism, you are in the wrong business. Professional services deliver nearly daily feedback on thoughts, behaviors and intentions. Consulting is an apprenticeship that is healthy but brutal. Do not be afraid to share initial ideas and work in progress with those closest to you. It is all built on trust. Chances are they are working on a parallel workstream for the same client and can clarify your thinking. Friends are often encouraging and can help you find novel ways to communicate your point. They can handle the mindless proofreading and format checking that is often overlooked. Feedback from your manager requires calibration. Know how baked the cake needs to be before sharing. Some chiefs love early prototypes and course-correct with you. Others give bad reviews for sharing unpolished work. Revise selectively after gathering diverse, pointed feedback. Stay open-minded but do not take everyone's advice. You own the work, and it is your responsibility to ensure the soup is tasty rather than suffering from too many cooks. If you left the final presentation on someone's desk, would they understand the logic and be convinced on its own merits? If so, enjoy your Friday afternoon. If not, you have work to do. Clients pay you to worry about their problems and deliver a point of view that holds up under pressure.

- 1Harvard Business Review on intellectual humility in leadership
- 2History of Bain and Company founding
- 3Peter Drucker on effective communication and decision making

Summary

Idea fight club works when the team shares a goal, trusts each other and has a clear decision maker. Do the hard work, structure your thinking and advocate for good ideas. Get feedback from peers and managers, revise selectively and share your thinking with the client. The deliverable earns its scar tissue.