



10 Ways To Improve Your Client Relationships

By Kevin Eikenberry

One thing is true for all consultants: if we have any work, we have clients. One of the most important parts of our work is maintaining and enhancing our relationships with our clients. Maintaining and growing these relationships makes the time spent on a project more enjoyable, satisfying and effective.

Having better relationships also improves the chance that we will get referrals and future business. The following are ten things you can do to grow these important business relationships, and some suggestions on how to get started.

#1: Have A Clear Contract With Your Client.

This is the number one guideline for a successful client engagement. Without a clear contract neither you nor your client can be clear on roles and responsibilities, deadlines and deliverables, methodologies and measures.

Beyond the importance of the contract to the project itself, a clear contract also is a great aid to a good working relationship. The goal of a contract is clarity, not legalese – as such; it is a great aid to improved client relationships.

Your mutually agreed-to contract should include the following as a minimum:

- What the roles and responsibilities are for you – and members of the client organization
- What methods you plan to use during the project
- The project timeline
- A description of success

#2: Get To Know Your Client Better.

All relationships are better when the individuals in the relationship take the time to get to know one another. Learn the client's interests. You will likely spend many hours with and around the client during the project.

You should know that they like gourmet French food or exotic candies or Oakland Raiders football. This is more important to some clients than others, but all of us like to have conversations with others about our interests.

Make it a point to learn something new about each client in every meeting you have. Once you learn something new, keep track of that information in your contact manager, in your project notes, or wherever you can find it when needed.

#3: Ask More Questions.

When we ask questions, we understand situations better. Take the time, make the time to ask your client how she feels, what she thinks, and try to understand her observations regarding the progress of the project and your performance. The skill of questioning is one of the most important we can develop to improve our consulting skills and our relationships.

#4: Be Willing To Say "No."

In many cases, clients ask us to do things beyond our capabilities or interests. When these new requests are outside the contract agreement, be willing to say no. Take time to understand both the client's reason for asking as well as your ability to deliver. Don't automatically say yes, just because "the Customer is always right."

Saying "No" may mean keeping your project on track by not expanding the scope of the project. Saying "No" may also mean not accepting additional work that the client would like you to do. In either case, it is easier to say no when you have a clear focus on your personal objectives.

Ask yourself "What is my business focus, both now and in the future – and how does this request fit into this picture?" More pragmatically, I have found myself asking if I would be excited by or interested in this new work. This is a great question to ponder and it helps me decide whether to say yes or no to a request.

#5: Be Willing To Say "Yes."

Sometimes yes is the right answer – and only you will know when. After weighing the opportunity the client offers you, the client will be grateful if you say yes! Saying yes often makes the client's job much easier. Saying yes can help strengthen your relationship with the client as well. The more work you do on the client's behalf, the more valuable you become. You know the systems, the people and the culture. These are good reasons for saying yes.

Taking on assignments that stretch your skills and comfort zones are another good reason to say yes. Remember the "getting out of bed in the morning test", ask yourself, "Would I be excited to do this piece of work?" If so, your best business decision might be to say, "We can do that!".

#6: Be A Problem Solver – And A Solution Finder.

Clients hire us to help them solve problems. The more problems we can help them solve, the better. This advice is in line with saying "yes", and somewhat counter to saying "no", but worthy of singular discussion. Sometimes our activities allow us to see things that can be helpful to the client. Weigh these opportunities and when appropriate, help (or offer to help) the client solve the problem – even if they didn't know the problem existed.

This advice starts before you search for those problems. It starts with being observant, and understanding the big picture of the client's business objectives. Clients will generally be thrilled if you can identify areas for improvement – especially when you have suggestions on how to improve the situation.

#7: Keep Your Distance.

Therapists say you can't help the family if you are part of the family. This is true for us as consultants as well. We do become more valuable the more we work in an organization, but we need to keep our role

clearly defined within the organization. Even as we build the relationships that make us successful, we need to be diligent in keeping our distance so we can continue to provide valued and effective advice and expertise.

Refer to your contract to help you stay within role. Experience shows that letting the client know that you are concerned for this “distance” will be appreciated. Without such conversations, the client may read your behavior as a lack of interest in their organization. When they understand your concerns about maintaining this distance, your efforts will be seen for what they are.

#8: Stay Focused.

Staying focused on your contract and on your deliverables is the best thing you can do to maintain and build your client relationship. Talk about deliverables and deadlines in client meetings. Showing that focus and then delivering what we say when promised, we build our credibility and enhance our relationships.

#9: Be A Learner.

Being a learner means being open to new techniques and ideas and approaching each project with fresh eyes. Few things will turn off the client more than you immediately snapping to a solution, assuming that their situation is “just like” five others you have seen. There are always nuances that will make a difference. Take the time to inquire about them, and integrate them into your solution.

The Zen saying of “be a beginner always” applies here. If we approach a situation as “Been there, done that”, our opportunity to meet and exceed the clients expectations is greatly diminished. At least as importantly, our attitude will show through, hurting our client relationships.

#10: Work At It.

Recognize that the client relationship is part of the job! Thinking about and working on the relationship will make you more successful in the current project, enhance your chance for future work, and make the project much more enjoyable. Not only that you'll get to know and learn from your client. Overall, a great return on your investment.

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