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When the Client is the Problem

Is the client always right? Many consultants agree that some client-consultant relationships simply don't work. In such cases, you may do yourself and the client a favor by walking away.

You've been called in to help resolve conflict among members of a group of high-level, technologically savvy professionals. The problem is so bad that the team has reached the point of physical intimidation.

That's the situation faced by Paul Glen, CMC, of C2 Consulting in Marina del Rey, Calif., when he was called in to work with a group of software developers whose project was being stalled. Glen, author of the forthcoming book *Leading Geeks: How to Manage and Lead People Who Deliver Technology*, was working for the CIO who, he says, "was part of the problem in that he would inadvertently egg people on." Yet when conflict arose, the client (essentially an introvert, says Glen) "would withdraw instead of facilitating a productive conflict."

When it came time to share his perceptions, the client "got quieter and quieter," Glen says. "When we got to the recommendations he just looked at them and said, 'We're not going to do this.'" Glen tried several avenues of reasoning with the client but, ultimately, could not persuade him to change.

Glen's experience is not unique.

Arlene Vernon, PHR, of HRx Inc., in Eden Prairie, Minn., is a speaker, consultant and author. She remembers an "in denial" client she worked with on a handbook project for a small, non-profit organization. "He just figured everybody was wrong but him!" says Vernon. "He would use a variety of different consultants simultaneously to get the response that he wanted or, as soon as they started speaking to the employees and finding out what was going on, he would switch consultants. He was just going to hire consultants until he heard that he was right!"

Faced with a conflict situation at a community bank, Gayla Sherry, president of Gayla R. Sherry Associates Inc. (www.grsainc.com)

in Edmond, Okla., conducted a survey and found that the president and CEO was actually the source of the conflict. Fortunately, says Sherry, she had told the president ahead of time that she didn't know what was going to come out in the survey and had asked, "Are you prepared to hear it?" As it turned out, he was. "He was very gracious about accepting the feedback and did a lot of things to resolve the problem."

But not every situation turns out so well, she admits. "I have had situations where, midway through a project, it's not going as either of us would have expected."

Susan Christy, Ph.D., CMC, of Christy Consulting Inc. in Pinole, Calif., says these situations are all too common. A psychologist, Christy helps business and academic teams improve productivity and resolve difficult people problems. "I've seen many clients who have fired the consultant before they'll hear the news," says Christy. "They ask us to solve the problem without approaching their style, their incompetence, their vulnerability, their role in the whole problem."

People who have been high achievers and moved up organizational ladders, says Christy, have a great investment in how they appear to others. "They're invested in being successful and being seen in a positive way. If they're not good, they're bad. If they're not approved of, they're disapproved of. The more there's this underlying vulnerability, the more they're likely not to want to hear any criticism."

So, what can you do if you find yourself faced with a difficult client—or a client who is part of the very problem you've been hired to "fix?"

Be Selective

First, recognize that you are under no obligation to take on every—or any—potential client you meet. Declining to accept an assignment may seem more easily said than done in a tight economy where consulting jobs are becoming increasingly difficult to land. However, experienced consultants find that some problems are seldom worth the paycheck.

"Fundamentally," says Peter Bye, president of MDB Group Inc., a consulting firm in Livingston, N.J., "a client has to want to do business with you and has to want what you have to offer. If they don't, you might still have a consulting engagement or a coaching engagement, but it's not necessarily going to be very satisfying for you."

"You really have to select the clients that are best suited to you," says Vernon. "Now that I'm not as desperate, I'm more selective."

I've become more and more aware of the need to be able to get along with your clients and enjoy them and feel that there's mutual respect."

She's not alone.

"I had a situation earlier this year," says Sherry, "where the client just simply changed the scope and objectives of the project midstream. I chose to walk away from the deal. I could not continue the project in the way the client wanted to."

"I think it's the privilege of being a consultant," says Glen, "that you can actually say to the client as you're discussing in the diagnosis phase, 'How are we going to handle this if I find that you're part of the problem?' This gives clients the opportunity to think about it up front and for you to gauge the reaction of the client. How willing is the client to engage in a change process that may include themselves?"

Nip It in the Bud!

Recognizing the potential for problems to develop in a client relationship and taking steps to manage those problems proactively is an approach used by a number of consultants.

"One of the biggest difficulties people encounter is that they often put themselves down and put the client up," says Sandra Crowe of Pivotal Point Training & Consulting (www.pivpoint.com) in Rockville, Md. Crowe is the author of *Since Strangling Isn't an Option* (Perigee, 1999). "This creates a real problem in the dynamic between you and the client. One of the first orders of business is to set yourself up as someone who has an equal level of power even though you're serving the client."

Gaining credibility as an expert, says Bye, may mean that you have to take a certain amount of grief from your clients. Dealing with a belligerent, abusive or just plain angry client can be intimidating. But it also can be a sign that a breakthrough is about to be made.

He describes a situation in which he was working with a man who was the head of a factory in a manufacturing environment. "He had a thick shell that I had to break through. I realized that I had to build credibility with him, so I just persevered. Don't take it personally."

Establishing clear expectations up front can help lay the foundation for the delivery of bad news later.

"Set the stage," recommends Christy. Say something like, "I generally find that the person who brings me in usually gets some

feedback and ways to shift or grow that are helpful, but not always easy to hear. Would you be open to that feedback?"

Sherry agrees. "Get as much nailed down ahead of time as you can, and if something changes, have the backbone to walk away when it's just not right."

At the same time, Christy suggests, "normalize, rather than pathologize this process." In others words, tell the client, "this is the way it works; let's expect this and work together." It's a "you're OK" approach that allows the client to save face in the event that he or she actually becomes identified as part of the problem.

Handling Unexpected Problems

But what if you didn't realize at the outset that the client might actually be part of the problem—or might represent a problem down the road?

"I think the most important thing for all of us is to look within first," says Crowe. Look at yourself. Look to see what you're doing to contribute to the situation.

Many clients, Christy notes, have a very strong need to be "right." "We need to work with their strengths and give them lots of acknowledgement," she says. "Often they have huge blind spots because they need to see themselves as OK. There is a desperate need to see themselves as successful, which means they generally need to see that the organization is doing well and that they are respected."

When dealing with clients, Crowe says, "One of the first, most basic principles is that the customer, in a certain way, is always right." The problem, she admits, "is that sometimes the customer feels a sense of entitlement, and often times your customer will treat you in a way they wouldn't treat their peers.

"If the client refuses to take any responsibility for being part of the problem," Crowe suggests, "you may have to work with people around the client."

In the case of the internal client, Bye did just that. "I got his permission to go to people on his team and they were really clear about the issues they saw." Still, in this case, the client remained "in denial." "There was really nothing I could effectively do," Bye admits. "Ultimately I just accepted that, with that client, I wasn't going to make any progress." With others, though, this approach has worked. "I've seen this input help sway clients," Bye asserts. "It's almost like they have a little awakening."

Not being afraid to deliver the bad news directly also can help move the relationship forward.

“If the client has a certain level of awareness,” says Crowe, “you can have a conversation with the client. You might say something like, ‘I’m not sure you’re aware of this, but there are some things that you may be doing that could actually contribute to the very situation that you’ve brought me in to fix.’ What I would say is, ‘the good news is that you have a lot of power to be able to control and work with the situation because you’re part of it.’”

Sherry agrees. “You just have to keep the lines of communication open and initiate follow-up with the client. Any time the door shuts, there’s a problem.”

Sometimes You Just Walk Away

But, what if you’ve already tried everything and the situation is still not improving.

“Find a different client!” says Vernon—and she’s not kidding. “One of the things that I’ve learned in 10 years of consulting is that you don’t have to beat your head against the wall. If it’s not a good client, celebrate the day they don’t want you any longer or initiate that process yourself.”

Bye agrees. “You just have to accept that there will be situations where the client doesn’t really want the assistance, even if they say they do.” At that point, Bye says, “I’ll say, ‘Look, I’d be happy to help you but it just doesn’t seem like there’s the possibility of real change here. My suggestion is that we just call it complete and move on.’”

Too many consultants, says Glen, “are tempted to chase the nickel.” But, he points out, “There’s nothing worse in terms of your career as a consultant than taking on projects you know will fail. You’re not serving your customer and you’re not serving your own career.”

“You can’t change people’s personalities,” Vernon says. “All you can do is provide clients with the tools, the insights and the expertise to help them do better.” But, ultimately, “it’s still their choice whether or not they move forward.”

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