Client Relationship RX: Seven Tough Clients and How to Win Them Over

By Andrew Sobel and Jerold Panas

You're a master at the work you do. Unfortunately, you've got one client (or maybe more than one) who's so hard to deal with you can't get to a place where you can prove your value. Sound familiar? It should. From time to time, we've all struggled with a client who seems indifferent, constantly questions our judgment, or calls our cell phone demanding attention on a Saturday night.

Early in my consulting career, I had a client who became downright abusive. When we first met, he was relaxed, confident, professional, and even charming. But underneath that veneer he was a mean-spirited tyrant. As time passed, he became ever-more demanding and even vicious.

One day, I walked into his office with a three-page memo I had written to summarize our conclusions. He noticed a typo on the second page and began angrily yelling at me. 'This is shoddy, unprofessional work,' he shouted across the table, his eyes bulging and face turning red. 'How could you show this to me? This is totally unacceptable!' His rant continued for a full minute. I had no idea how to handle it.

I was only 28 at the time, felt utterly trapped in the project. And while I admit this was an extreme case, difficult clients are everywhere, and most of us will, at some point, have to deal with them. The good news is you can often connect with these people and even turn them into loyal fans.

Sure, there may be the occasional need to fire a client, but for the most part, you can salvage the relationship. It's just a matter of mastering some basic relationship rules and putting them into practice.

Here, are seven types of tough clients you need to be aware of and the strategies for dealing with them:

The Insecure Client. These clients are unsure of themselves and it manifests as them being unsure of you and nervous about failing or looking bad. They are difficult to work for because they micromanage you. They find it hard to trust outsiders and won't let you build relationships with their boss or other executives in their organization—they keep you for themselves. Insecure clients may also have difficulty trusting you to do new and different things for them, and they review your work over and over.

The Prescription: Build more trust and reduce their perception of risk. This means investing in more face time, reassuring them about your product or service delivery, showing them what you're doing at key stages of the engagement, increasing communications, and demonstrating utter reliability and consistency. Convince the insecure client that you should go together to see their boss, so that you will also have a relationship with him or her. Explain how this will ultimately help them and the program you're working on together. You need to frequently reassure this type of client and give them a sense of control.

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The Boundary Pusher. Clients like this perceive no boundaries around you and your work. They will call and email you at all hours of the day and night, expecting an immediate response. They don't distinguish between something that's truly important and urgent and an issue that's just a simple "to do." They invade your personal life and leave you feeling swarmed and even overwhelmed.

The Prescription: It's best to explain your boundaries at the very start of the relationship, especially if you suspect this may become an issue. Say (or write), On workdays, we respond to emails within four hours unless it's clearly urgent, in which case we'll get back to you within the hour. If something comes up over the weekend, unless it's an emergency, we'll respond Monday morning.

If you didn't set clear boundaries early on—or if you did, but the client is ignoring them—you can still alter their behavior without direct confrontation. Simply answer the email you get on Saturday on Sunday night or Monday morning; or, write a one-liner back that says, 'Steve, I'll respond first thing Monday when I'm at my office.' Also, regularly prioritize with your client. Just say: 'Mary, right now my priority is getting that analysis that we discussed in shape. Can this wait until Thursday?'

The Do Nothing Client. There are some clients who just never move ahead and get things done. You meet with them, you talk, you agree on next steps, and so on—but then, nothing. This is more of a frustrating client than a "difficult" one. In fact, you might have a very good and pleasant relationship with a Do Nothing executive. Still, you need to produce, and that requires the client to move ahead.

The Prescription: Explore what's behind your client's inaction. Is it insecurity and fear (see type one)? Are they hemmed in by a boss or another executive who is blocking them from taking action? Do they work in an organizational culture that is risk averse and prizes survival above all? There are many different reasons why a client doesn't act, and you need to diagnose why so that you know how to address the inaction.

Ask yourself if you might be able to work with them to reassure them about your approach—perhaps even having them talk to another client. Can you help them manage the stakeholders that may be getting in the way? Can you increase their sense of urgency by illustrating the costs of not acting?

Also, ask yourself if the problem or issue you're addressing is truly an urgent, important one. Maybe the client's priorities have shifted. If so, you need to know that so you can help the client accomplish something that does provide value.

The Know-It-All. This client thinks they know more about what you do than you and is constantly telling you how to do your job. They give you way too many suggestions in areas that are really outside their expertise. They are overly directive.

I've had clients, who themselves were terrible at group facilitation, try and tell me how to facilitate a training workshop. I've had others try and impose their own models for client loyalty, having just hired me to give them mine.

The Prescription: Reestablish your respective roles. If gentle rebukes don't work (Through many years of doing this, I've found this is the most effective approach…), you have to put your foot down with a Know-It-All client. Confront them. Tell them they have hired you because of your expertise and experience, and that they need to give you the proper berth to exercise it on their behalf.

Twice I have had to say to clients, 'When you buy a Mercedes-Benz car, do you tell the salesman that you want to travel to Germany to inspect the production line and make suggestions to them about how to assemble your car?'. Then I'd say, 'I didn't think so, because you know Mercedes is a great brand and understands how to make cars. Similarly, you need to let me do my job for you and not advise me on my own expertise.' In both cases, the client laughed and backed off.

Mr. or Ms. Aloof. Some clients treat you like a vendor and resist all efforts to build a real relationship. They are often very professional and can be perfectly pleasant when you're with them. But it's a purely arm's-length relationship, which seriously limits how much you're able to help them achieve.

The Prescription: Learn more about the client's agenda and help them accomplish it. You may not truly understand their priorities—their underlying needs and goals. What's important to them right now? What are they trying to accomplish this year? Everyone has a hot button—have you discovered what it is for this executive? Once you do, you'll be in a better position to help them and go "above and beyond" the letter of your contract. Also, try and find out how your client views the relationship. It may just be that he or she feels the relationship is perfectly fine and doesn't need it to be anything more than what it is. And that may be good enough for now.

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The Insatiable Client. This client feels the work is never, ever good enough, and they also micromanage you—although for different reasons from the Insecure client. Their behavior can absolutely wear you down. You never feel like you're succeeding. These people have carping, critical personalities and can't give out compliments—who knows, maybe they grew up with overly demanding parents themselves!

The Prescription: Carefully calibrate expectations at the beginning of each engagement or transaction. IT firms have "service level agreements" (SLAs)—maybe you need to go deeper into specifics around the type, quality, and format of your output for the client.

Don't become overly needy about getting compliments and positive feedback. This is a client, not your spouse, and as long as you're doing a good job and achieving the agreed-upon goals, you shouldn't worry about getting a constant stream of praise.

The Tyrant. They have personality and emotional issues and treat their people—and perhaps you—terribly. Everyone who works for them hates them. Who knows why someone acts like this? There are many possible reasons. The Tyrant could be a good-hearted person who happens to have an anger management issue, or they could be genuinely mean—like my client from years ago.

The Prescription: If the client is nice to you, but tyrannical with their team, you may be able to coach them and influence them to change their behavior. Unless you're specifically in a coaching relationship, however, they may not be open to that kind of personal feedback. If the client is treating you or your colleagues badly, consider moving on.

Life is too short to spend time in abusive relationships, be they at work or in our personal lives! Occasionally you may be able to have a frank discussion with a Tyrant that results in improvement, but generally if bad behavior is that extreme, the person will not be able to hide their true colors forever.

In summary, when faced with a difficult client, you should consider these four steps:

1. Assess. Diagnose why the person is acting that way. What's behind the behavior?
2. Make an action plan. Identify remedial actions you can take to address the underlying dynamic (e.g., if a client is micromanaging you because of insecurity, what steps can you take to build greater trust?).
3. Confront. If appropriate, confront the client with their behavior (e.g., point out that they are second-guessing your expertise and experience and ask them to stop).
4. Finally, fish or cut bait. Decide what your boundaries are, and if you've really had enough, move on and focus on more fruitful relationships. You won't need to fire a client often, but doing so can be extremely healthy, not only for your business but for your own sense of self-esteem and well-being.

Just knowing you have a plan to deal with difficult clients can bring a huge sense of relief. Relationships may feel complex and mysterious, but, really, they're subject to some pretty simple rules. When you learn them, and put them into practice, it can shift your work and your career to a higher level.

About the Authors:

Andrew Sobel and Jerold Panas are coauthors of Power Relationships: 26 Irrefutable Laws for Building Extraordinary Relationships (Wiley, 2014, ISBN: 978-1-118-58568-9, $25.00) and the accompanying workbook, Power Relationships Personal Planning Guide (available at www.andrewsobel.com).

Andrew is the leading authority on client relationships and the skills and strategies required to earn enduring client loyalty. He is also the coauthor, with Jerold, of the bestselling Power Questions (Wiley) as well as seven other acclaimed books on building clients for life. He has been featured in the Harvard Business Review, the New York Times, and USA Today. His clients include senior executives at leading companies such as Citigroup, Ernst & Young, Cognizant, and Booz Allen Hamilton.

For more information, please visit www.andrewsobel.com

Jerold is the world's leading consultant in philanthropy and the CEO of Jerold Panas, Linzy & Partners, the largest consulting firm in the world for advising nonprofit organizations and foundations on fundraising. Jerry is the author of 14 bestselling books on fundraising and nonprofit management. He works directly with CEOs, boards, and development professionals around the world.

About the Book:

Power Relationships: 26 Irrefutable Laws for Building Extraordinary Relationships (Wiley, 2014, ISBN: 978-1-118-58568-9, $25.00) is available at bookstores nationwide, from major online booksellers, and direct from the publisher by calling 800-225-5945. In Canada, call 800-567-4797. For more information, please visit the book's page on www.wiley.com

The accompanying workbook, Power Relationships Personal Planning Guide, is available only at www.andrewsobel.com and is free for anyone who buys the book.