Clients From Hell

By Glenn Parker

In more than 30 years as an independent consultant, at least 99 percent of my client experiences have been positive. Some clients became personal friends and, later colleagues, as they joined the consulting ranks. However, there have been a few that deserve the designation, Client from Hell.

And now, just as security personnel are trained to recognize potential terrorists using behavioral profiling, here are a few client types I look out for:

The Shopper. "I'll know what I want, when I see it." This person is lazy. He or she has not taken the time to do the basic needs assessment and problem identification that are the foundations of consultant utilization. Here are a few appropriate responses:

Suggest some basic assessment tools that she can quickly and easily implement. Offer to provide shadow consulting to ensure it goes well. Propose a two-stage intervention where the first stage involves data collection designed and completed by you with her assistance. Stage two is the implementation of the project. If he or she won't do the necessary digging or hire you to do the assessment, make your way to the exit. You do not do smorgasbords.

The Wimp. "I'd like you to convince my boss that this project is needed." This is the client's role. So, when a client asks you to sell a project, it's a clear sign of a powerless, ineffective person. A consultant can provide options but should not be an internal advocate for a particular project. If a client asks you to "sell" a project internally, you have a couple of options. You could offer to coach him on how to prepare and deliver the message. Another strategy with the wimp is to propose a joint presentation where he handles the need section and you cover the "how to" component bringing in your experience with other clients.

If neither option appeals to him you probably want to move on, because an unempowered client is even worse than a lazy one.

The Auditor. "I didn't think you would charge me for that." "That" can be anything from creating a custom case study, to participating in a conference call, to presenting a summary of the project results. When a client starts to question charges or seems to expect free services "just thrown in," this a sign of a problem situation.

Before you head for the door, you might want to explain your current charges in some detail, with examples, and then get an agreement on what is to be paid up to that point. Or you might provide a similar explanation of upcoming tasks and charges and then send a confirming letter that asks for his signature indicating agreement.

If the nitpicking continues, then ease out of the company. A "nickel and dime" client is not worth the effort.

The Sleaze. "I know your interviews are confidential but I'd like to know what everyone said about me." Some clients will even hint that "telling all" will result in a larger consulting contract. This situation can be a slippery slope for a consultant because integrity once lost is usually forever lost. A couple of approaches that can be useful include high-level summaries or a reexplanation of the importance of confidentiality. There is nothing wrong with providing the client with themes or generalized conclusions, but, revealing "who said what" is just plain unethical. Explain both the importance of providing the participants with a safe place to discuss issues and that you have given your word that all conversations are confidential.

If the client persists, restate your position on confidentiality and then gracefully exit the meeting and the organization. An unethical client will hurt you too.

The Messenger. "I know all these changes are making it difficult for you but that's what my boss wants." The contact person or client's representative will often appear or sound like he is on your side

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because he articulates your frustration often before you do. But this is a sure sign that you are not dealing with the real client but his or her messenger. It is important not to "shoot the messenger" but it is equally important to get in front of the real client. Ask to meet with the decision-maker as soon as possible. Make it clear that every change carries a real cost. In other words, the meter is running. Suggest that the boss may want to know this.

Act quickly to get to the real client or risk being played for a fool in a corporate version of "good-cop/ bad cop."

In general, it's a good idea to go back to the basics of good consulting practice.

- Identify the real client.
- Clarify the needs of the project.
- Understand the parameters such as budget, time and other available resources.
- Explain your role, methodology, values and expectations.
- Negotiate an agreement that specifies the outcomes, deliverables, tasks, roles and costs.
- Build in periodic reviews and a final de-briefing.

Following these practices is still the best way to prevent wasting time with clients from hell. And an ounce of prevention…

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