
The Only Rule You Need To Build Strong, Lasting Client Relationships

by Robbie Kellman Baxter



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In the case of how to manage winning client relationships—once again, the golden rule applies. “Treat your clients the way you would like to be treated” is useful in nearly every situation.

I have been running a consulting firm focused on growth strategies for the past 4 years, and I believe I owe a great deal of my success to this rule.

Sample applications of the “Golden Rule”:

Prospecting

Make sure you have a good reason to call—perhaps a colleague in common who suggested the meeting, or some information to share that would be relevant to the prospect. You might send over an article you recently wrote, or a link to something interesting in the news. Take the time to learn about the company and your prospect before contacting them. Identify attributes of the business that you admire and also areas where you think the company is at risk. This kind of preparation shows commitment, professionalism and respect. Most of us are happy and even eager to meet new people in our professional community who might be able to help us—but don’t want to be hounded by strangers with no obvious value.

Scoping the Proposal

This is an area worth spending a lot of time. You are helping the prospect and yourself by being thorough and by waiting to write a proposal until you are virtually certain that the prospect is going to accept your proposal. Spend time exploring their needs,

why they want the work done, what value it will create, what success will “look like” for them, how they could envision this project failing etc.

Even if you never get to the proposal stage, you are providing value to your prospect by helping them flesh out their needs and priorities—thus being a friend and colleague even before you sign a contract.

Conducting the Project

Before you begin the project, make sure you put yourself in your client’s shoes. What could go wrong? What risk is your client taking by hiring you for this project? In many cases, the client has colleagues who think this project is a waste of money, or that the scope could be better handled by someone internal who “knows the business”. The client might be concerned that you will take too much of their time, or not execute properly. Conduct yourself onsite as an emissary of your client. The client is the only one you need to make happy, but ruffling feathers unnecessarily will create headaches for your client.

Being a consultant requires a higher standard than a typical employee—because your “colleagues” haven’t had the same opportunity to know you and aren’t likely to want to invest in building a relationship, they may be quicker to arrive at a negative judgment. So, even though you may be doing very sensitive work—evaluating performance of key teams or deciding whether to shut down a business line—remember to treat every person you come across with the utmost respect and courtesy. It will make your client proud to have you on the team.

Handling Conflict

Conflict always happens, even with the best of relationships. Nearly every consultant has faced at least one of the following challenges:

- scope creep
- delayed feedback
- political landmines
- unreasonable expectations
- midstream change in corporate priorities

Handle these challenges in the way that you'd like them to be handled. For most people I know, that means: identifying the challenges as soon as they arise, approaching the problem like you're on the same team and working together with the client for a solution. It also means taking the time to see the challenge from the client's perspective. Ask yourself some questions:

- Has the scope grown because the client has realized there are objectives more urgent than the ones you initially agreed to?

- Is your client being caught off-guard by the political landmines too?
- What would be in the client's best interest?
- Can you think of a solution that would help their situation *and* yours?

Staying in Touch

Be a friend to your clients, even when the meter isn't running. Don't you hope that your business colleagues think of you when they hear about or see something that could be helpful to you? Building strong friendships doesn't mean spending hours of time together, but it could mean sending emails with relevant news tidbits or ideas, making introductions when you come across someone who might be helpful, or even taking them to lunch periodically for a (free) brainstorming session.

Sometimes it's easy to forget that clients are just people. Like us, they are trying to build strong careers, make a good living, and build meaningful relationships. Keeping these shared truths in mind can make you a better consultant as well as a happier human being.

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