

## Converting Client Conflict to Opportunity

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STRATEGIES

It happens to the best of us. In the course of delivering results to a valued client, you hit a snag. Nearly every consultant has faced problems like scope creep, delayed client feedback, political landmines, unreasonable expectations, or a midstream change in corporate priorities.

These issues may slow down the project, either because of extra, unanticipated work or because of delayed feedback. They may add cost to your delivery. They may create frustration for you and for clients.

So, what do you do? In managing winning client relationships—the golden rule applies: Treat your clients the way you would like to be treated.

Handle these challenges in the way that you'd like them to be handled. For most people that means: Identify challenges as soon as they arise; approach the problem like you and the client are on the same team; and, work together with the client for a solution

It also means taking the time to see the problem from the client's perspective. Ask yourself some questions:

- \* Has the project scope grown because the client realizes there are objectives more urgent than the ones you initially agreed to?

- \* Is your client being caught off-guard by political landmines too?

- \* What would be in the client's best interest?

- \* Can you think of a solution that would help the client and you?

Two Stories with Happy Endings:

From Scope Creep to Follow-On Project

Over a three-day period, a client for whom I was doing a competitive analysis asked me to add four new competitors to my analysis, and suggested we include additional research. For me, that meant adding 20 percent more work to the project.

At first, I wanted to please her and said “of course”. Then, after a day or so, I realized how much time it would take, and I got resentful. Every time I got a call or email from her or her team, I felt a pang of irritation.

Finally, I called the client and said, “I’ve been thinking about the project, and realize that adding more competitors and areas of research will take longer than I expected.” Before I could say anymore, she interrupted and said, “Yes, I was meaning to talk with you—how much more money will I owe you?”

The learning for me was that clients are generally reasonable and fair people. Also, I learned that scope creep is often a chance for follow-on work.

From No Response to New Project

I was finishing up an assessment of a potential new market for a client and we decided not to pursue the market we'd been examining. I continued to receive calls from a few of the people I'd interviewed early in the process, asking about partnerships with my client. My client was unresponsive, and I was starting to sense conflict between various people at the client company and me.

Before it hit a boiling point, I brought the issue up with my project sponsor and, after a day or two, she responded by saying that although these opportunities were interesting, there was no one to handle them internally. She asked me to put together a proposal in which my team would handle them.

So what was initially a source of frustration—being ignored by the client (which I had thought was due to politics, lack of respect, and some other negative reason) turned out to be an opportunity to create value for a maxed-out team.

A Different Approach to Conflict

Conflict is usually a symptom of a bigger issue, for example, a major change in strategy—a problem being faced by your client. Just as a doctor sees symptoms as clues in

diagnosing and ultimately healing patients, we as consultants have an opportunity (even a responsibility) to analyze conflict thoughtfully.

Occasionally, these “symptoms” can identify clients who are not worth keeping—perhaps they are unreasonable or irresponsible. A detailed and specific project proposal up front can be useful in resolving misunderstandings, which are often what “conflicts” really are.

That said, identifying conflicts when (even before) they arise and respectfully trying to understand the source from the client’s perspective can lead to stronger, more honest relationships, and possibly even new projects.

So, the next time you find yourself in a situation of conflict with a client, don’t despair. It could be an opportunity to strengthen your relationship.

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