

'My Client Is A Jerk': 3 Keys To Transforming Client Relationships Gone Bad

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Have you ever had a difficult client? I don't mean the client from hell, I just mean garden-variety difficult. Difficult clients come in lots of different flavors.

There's the client who will not take the time up front to share critical information, explore ideas, or otherwise involve you in the early stages of a project.

There's the client who just cannot make a decision, regardless of how much data or analyses you provide at their request.

There's the client who is frozen by politics or fear or ignorance, who will not face facts about critical issues.

Finally, there's the client with personality issues, who argues, or rejects, or is otherwise disrespectful to you and your team, yet often shows favoritism to someone else or another team.

Fortunately, there is a common thread to all of these cases, which--if we understand it--can help us succeed.

The common thread has nothing to do with the clients. The common thread is us.

The Client Situation

First, let's get some perspective--about our clients, and about ourselves.

We've all said, if only in our heads, "My client is a jerk." But "My client is a jerk" is a terrible problem statement. The client is unlikely to accept it as a problem statement. It's highly subjective, and it's quite unverifiable.

People in a position to hire outside professionals typically have achieved some degree of success in life. While it's popular lately to describe the prevalence of "a**holes" in business (see Robert I. Sutton's book, *The No A**hole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*), my guess is their frequency is overestimated. Most clients are intellectually and emotionally intelligent.

Most clients have spouses, or parents, or siblings, who seem to be quite capable of loving them. Most have a boss who has promoted them.

It is wise to assume that, even if their behavior is bad, they have some ability to get by in life. True psychotics are pretty rare in business.

2. Check your ego at the door. The best way to lose the sale is to try very hard to get the sale; the best way to lose the argument is to try very hard to win the argument. It is not about you. The only one who thinks it is about you is you. Focus on the client, not yourself.
3. Be curious. Is your client "difficult?" Be curious as to why. What is he afraid of? What is at stake for her? What is your role in the situation? What are you afraid of? On what basic issues do you see differently? What do you think the client sees as the problem statement? What problem are you both trying to solve?

There aren't any difficult clients. Not really. There are only relationships that aren't working well. And nearly all of those can be fixed. But it must start with us.

As Phil McGee says, "Blame is captivity; responsibility is freedom." To get free of "difficult clients," take responsibility for fixing the relationships.