



When Clients Put You on the Hot Seat



By Michael W. McLaughlin, Contributing Editor

I knew something was seriously wrong when my client's newly hired CFO called to say he was "voiding" my last invoice. Well, he *had* promised the client's management team that he'd be aggressive in managing costs. I didn't expect him to start with me.

We all face sticky situations and cranky clients—they go with the territory. It's not tricks or tactics that help you meet those challenges, but a mindset of healthy respect for your client and yourself, and a focus on the interests you have in common.

"We Have a Problem"

Nobody creates a client problem on purpose, but it happens. You miss a milestone, people get upset with one another, and there are misunderstandings about scope, among other things. All can lead to tough client situations.

When a project kicks off, though, everyone wants a speedy, successful conclusion. You may run into detractors and internal politics, but shared optimism usually drowns out the protestations of any naysayers.

Still, momentum and the best intentions aren't enough to prevent the inevitable bumps in the road. It's easy for even a small glitch to turn into a serious threat to the project and the client relationship. So it matters how you get past those obstacles.

Avoiding the Blame Game

The fastest way to slow progress on resolving any issue is to try and pin the blame on someone else. Too often, I hear consultants calling their clients jerks (or worse) when something doesn't go as they'd like. As soon as you blame the client, two things happen:

1. Your focus becomes to shield yourself (and your ego) from the negative implications of the situation. But that false sense of security is not sustainable. Eventually, you have to face the issue objectively.
2. The resolution process gets bogged down. When you need speed the most, playing the blame game is like dropping a boat anchor.

It's equally destructive, though, to blame yourself for every bad situation. Some clients readily point the finger at the "expert" as soon as the smallest problem arises. I know one client who regularly blames consultants for the outcomes of his poor decisions. And he lets everyone know it.

Once you accept the blame, regardless who is at fault, your tendency is to try to make the problem go away, at any cost. Usually, that means taking on extra (often unpaid) work. And it absolves your client from any accountability for the situation. If you take that approach, don't be surprised if you find yourself in the same position again and again.

Of course, you have to know why something went wrong. You can't solve a problem without diagnosing it. But blame simply begets more blame. Tempers flare, positions harden, and real problem solving comes to a standstill.

Addressing Client Challenges

[Telltale Signs of Problem Clients](#)

[Dealing with Difficult Clients: How to Transform Client Relationships Gone Bad](#)

Granted, some people embrace the blame game and have raised it to an art form. But if you get tagged as a finger-pointer, the client is likely to see you as someone who refuses to take responsibility for decisions and actions. That is fatal for a consultant.

Even if you are confronting finger pointing, resist the urge to join the fray. Avoid the blame game and watch how much faster you resolve problems.

It's Not a Win-Lose Proposition

If you and your client discuss any problem with three principles in mind, the solution will come more quickly and you'll strengthen your ability to work together.

Begin with the simple acknowledgement that no one caused the problem intentionally. It's natural to be upset that you have to deal with a bad situation, but your interests and those of your client should be in alignment. So define the problem quickly and decide on a course of action to solve it.

Next, recognize that most project problems result from poor decisions. At the same time, remember that most people make the best decisions possible given the information available at the time. Find an answer to the problem first, and *then* look at the decision-making process to see what you can do differently in the future.

Finally, resolving a problem situation isn't a win-lose proposition, even if it sometimes seems that way. As you work through the issue, remind yourself and the client that you have interests in common. In the heat of a conflict, it's easy to forget that. If the conversation gets rough, take a step back and reflect on and reaffirm your points of mutual interest before you return to the issue at hand.

Searching for "Aha"

Once you and the client agree on the definition of the problem, get all the facts and assumptions out in the open, even if that's painful. Sometimes, we convince ourselves that we already know the facts, but resist that notion and keep an open mind. Few things impede issue resolution more than a closed mind.

As you discuss what happened, be assertive—not combative—in conveying your perspective. Sometimes, you have to let others reach conclusions on their own.

And remember that you are talking to a peer. You're not a supplicant addressing the Grand Pooh-bah. In an open, objective discussion, it's common for one or more people to have that "aha" moment of epiphany that allows for a breakthrough.

When my client's CFO said he was voiding my final invoice, my first reaction was typical: I was indignant and a bit panicked. I decided to keep an open mind, not blame anyone (including myself), and see what we could work out.

An abbreviated version of the conversation went something like this:

CFO: We've decided that we shouldn't pay your final invoice.

Me: I see. Since we did this work before you arrived, I want to make sure you have all the facts. Our team did deliver the promised results at a fixed fee that we negotiated in advance.

CFO: Yes, but you failed to provide consulting support at a pivotal point in the project. As a consequence, we incurred unnecessary overtime expenses and think you should share those costs with us.

Me: Were you aware that our team anticipated that problem and offered the support you mentioned ahead of

time?

CFO: You didn't push hard enough for that. You should have known better. You *are* the experts, after all.

Me: Well, we felt so strongly about it that we offered to support the effort at no cost to you.

CFO: Really? Tell me about why we didn't take you up on that offer.

From that point, we easily found a solution.

You can resolve many difficult situations by reaching a meeting of the minds on facts and assumptions. But you'll never get to that point unless you can handle the give and take that accompanies tense conversations.

That means airing all the facts, even the ones you don't agree with. It also means resisting the rush to judgment.

Cardinal Rules for Tough Client Situations

When the client says, "We have a problem," these simple rules will help guide your way to resolution.

- Affixing blame doesn't *fix* anything
- Define the problem in a way that allows you to *solve* it
- Test the validity of all assumptions and facts
- Disagree without being disagreeable
- Prevent future problems by focusing on how decisions are made
- Keep reminding yourself and others that no one intended to create the problem.

The most important point is this: the success of the services you deliver and the results you achieve depend in large part on the quality of the personal interactions you have with others along the way.

Keep that in mind and you'll be able to tackle any problem clients throw your way.

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