When Clients Don't Seem to Want a Relationship

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Question

The CFO at my client won't invest the time to build a relationship with me. What can I do?

Answer

It's easy to take it personally when this happens, but you shouldn't. It's also easy to say, "this client just isn't interested in relationships," but usually that is not actually that case--most people do enjoy relationships and they serve many important functions, such as risk reduction.

What usually IS the case is that you have not shown that what you are doing is important and valuable enough to merit the executive's attention and to impel them to invest in the relationship. So, a couple of suggestions:

First of all, temper your expectations and remember that the outside advisor is often more eager to develop a personal relationship than the client is. A large project or transaction may be extremely important to you, and it may consume the majority of your time for a period of weeks, months, or even years. Naturally, you want to have a great relationship with your client. For a senior client executive, however, your engagement may represent only a fraction of her responsibilities, and developing a relationship with you may not be a priority at all. Sometimes, relationships are asymmetrical in this respect.

Second, remember that different people develop trust and confidence at different speeds. I have known some clients with whom I immediately clicked, and within a few months we had already progressed to a trusted advisor relationship. Others have required a year or two of working together to reach this stage. So be patient.

Third, have you identified a vital interest, need, or goal and shown the client that you can help with it? Remember, everyoneâ€”even the most hard-boiled, aloof clientâ€”has something they are trying to accomplish. If someone doesn't want to spend time with you, it's usually because you haven't demonstrated the ability to help and/or your intentions are suspect.

Fourth, have you shown that you can be trusted? I don't mean trusted to do the job--I mean trusted to provide insight that goes above and beyond the job itself; trusted to be disreet, consistent, and reliable; trusted to use the client's time efficiently; and so on.

So, redouble your efforts to understand your client's agenda of critical needs and priorities--both on a business and a personal level. Think about how you might contribute to those needs and priorities. And then be persistent: Today, or next week, your client may be focused on some other set of issues that have little to do with you. But your time will come if you stick with it.