

How do you recover when clients feel they've been let down?

Question

How do you recover when clients feel they've been let down or are otherwise disappointed about something?

Answer

I recently interviewed a client of mine on the topic of client crises, as part of some advisory work I was doing for her organization. “Do you have all night?” she asked, laughing. “They’re continuous!”

Anyone who works with clients faces periodic crises or rough patches in their relationships—it’s inevitable. Because of the complex nature of human interaction, not every client is going to be deliriously happy with you and your work, all of the time. So how do you respond when things go wrong?

Here are 8 principles that should guide you when you are confronted with a client crisis:

1. *Respond rapidly.* If a client is unhappy, deal with it immediately. Don’t make an appointment in three weeks to discuss it. Your willingness to drop what you’re doing to urgently discuss your client’s concerns will by itself improve the situation. Sometimes, the client simply needs to hear, “What you think is very important to me and I want to (take the next flight/drive 2 hours/use up my Sunday morning/etc.) to meet with you and discuss this.” For some types of crises, especially those without a clear fix, the response becomes the solution.
2. *Listen without being defensive.* When someone is upset, they want you to listen and empathize without passing judgment on what they have said. Emotions, in effect, are like facts to the aggrieved party. The worst thing you can do is start to listen and then slowly begin to counter what your client is saying—e.g., “Well, you’re right that we were not very inclusive of Bill but after all he did a terrible job so it’s not unexpected that we’d react that way, it’s only normal...” Listen deeply, and thank your client for sharing her thoughts with you.
3. *Say you’re sorry.* Even if you think the blame is equally spread, apologizing can help to defuse the situation and begin a new dialog. It’s hard to keep kicking someone when they apologize to you.
4. *Collaborate on the solution.* Don’t jump too quickly to a solution (for example, saying, halfway through the conversation, “We’ll put a new project manager in immediately...”). Involve your client in developing the answer, and only do so after thoroughly understanding all their concerns and the actual circumstances.
5. *Offer amends.* If in fact you have failed in some way, it can help to offer amends. A client of mine told me how one of his clients recently went into a rage over an invoice that he received. He felt it was totally unjustified. In reality, some good, honest work had been done and the invoice was appropriate. But my client had done a very poor job of communicating just how complicated this small piece of work was going to be. After listening carefully, my client immediately offered a substantial fee credit towards their next engagement. The angry executive was delighted over this, and the incident was over almost immediately. In fact, the relationship was strengthened.
6. *Avoid excuses.* This goes along with not being defensive. It’s natural to want to explain to the client all the reasons why you are not at fault. Once you have defused the anger or other upset emotions, you may very well be able to have this discussion. But don’t lead with excuses.
7. *Anticipate crisis.* If you speak frequently to your client and have lots of open communication, you will be able to head off most crises. If there is an atmosphere of openness between you, there’s a greater likelihood that your client’s concerns will surface when they are baby concerns rather than when they grow into monsters.

8. *Get things out into the open.* When negative emotions are kept in the dark, they fester and grow. When you get them out into the light of day, they shrink and often disappear. Try to create transparency in your client relationships. If you know there is a sticky issue they are upset about, try to confront it openly and get it out on the table.

The best illustration of this idea is a wonderful poem by William Blake (1757-1827), called "The Poison Tree." The first stanza is as follows:

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe;
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

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Like a boiling teakettle, an upset client needs to vent steam or else they may explode.