

What is *All for One* about?

All for One: 10 Strategies for Building Trusted Client Partnerships

By Andrew Sobel

1. What is a “Trusted Client Partnership”?

Trusted client partnerships are client relationships that transcend any one individual professional, issue, or project. They endure for many years, providing a stable revenue stream to the service provider and great value for the client. Some firms call them “Key Clients” or “Office of the Chairman Accounts.” The US Navy, for example, has been a continuous client of Booz Allen Hamilton for 70 years. Invariably, the work conducted for these major clients focuses on critical strategic and operational issues. No more than 20% of a firm’s clients will usually fit into this category, but they provide a disproportionately large share of revenues and profits—and often create valuable intellectual capital that can be re-used elsewhere. Trusted client partnerships, in short, are the lifeblood of most services organizations. In *All for One*, I also call these “Level 6” relationships.

2. Why did you write *All for One*?

Some of my clients have struggled to understand how to systematically build these large, institutional client relationships; others wish they could develop more of them. I wanted to create, in essence, a field guide to reach Level 6—trusted client partner (the first 5 levels are contact, acquaintance, expert for hire, steady supplier, and trusted advisor). I was fortunate in that a number of great firms opened up and let me study their most significant clients. In analyzing them, I realized that it isn’t just about the derring-do of one or two rainmakers—it’s actually as much or more about creating the right culture and organization to support the professionals who are asked to lead these large relationships.

3. What does the expression “all for one” mean, anyway?

“One for all, and all for one” was the motto of the musketeers in Alexander Dumas’ book, *The Three Musketeers*. They had a unitary purpose, which was to protect the King from the evil Cardinal Richelieu. The musketeers were inseparable: their ethos dictated that each individual would put the group first, and that the group would in turn always endeavor to help the individual succeed. In my title, the “One” is first of all the *client*; and secondarily, it’s the *individual professional* who must be supported by the firm. In a large services firm like Ernst & Young—or at a global bank like Citigroup—the fundamental challenge is to create a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. You do this by getting all of your professionals to work collaboratively to bring the right service offerings and best ideas to each and every client.

4. What should firms be doing differently during an economic recession?

The basic blueprint to develop Level 6 client relationships applies in a recession as well as in boom times. The current downturn, however, requires some special strategies. First, you have to increase face-time with clients and prospective clients—you have to get out in front of people more often, bringing ideas, perspectives, and suggestions to help them be more efficient; and adding value around topics of importance to them. Second, you need to help clients understand what they can do to stay afloat and even grow their business during the contraction. This means spending more time than usual to dig into their agenda—their most critical concerns and issues right now—and to understand their business. Third, this is a time to be creative about how you engage with clients. Consider using slack capacity to invest in understanding an important issue of interest to your client; think about how to change the “experience environment” for the relationship—e.g., getting your client offsite, involving new players in your interactions, and creating higher levels of collaboration; propose novel ways of working together, including innovative team structures, pricing, and contractual arrangements; and so on. Now is the time to take some risks and get out of your comfort zone.

5. A “me first” ethos has prevailed in many quarters over the last few years. How do you now motivate people to collaborate for the common good?

There are three platforms or strategies that you can use to create a collaborative culture. The first I call *Inculcation*. Leaders need to inculcate—or imprint—the collaborative values on the organization through their own behavior. They need to role model the collaboration and client focus they seek, and communicate this message on a consistent, daily basis. The second platform is *Institutionalization*, which is about developing the organizational structures and processes to reinforce collaboration. This means creating client-centered teams and organizational units, ensuring that measurement and reward systems support long-term relationship development, and so on. Finally, a firm’s *Infrastructure* needs to support collaboration. The most innovative service firms—IBM is an excellent example—are using leading edge collaboration software and knowledge management systems to link their far-flung professionals, encourage collaborative innovation, and connect with clients.

6. Isn’t being a trusted advisor good enough?

My first book, *Clients for Life*, sets out a comprehensive model for 7 attributes that define a trusted client advisor. Reaching trusted advisor status (what I call Level 5 in *All for One*) is essential, and it’s the foundation upon which you build a Level 6 Trusted Client Partnership. However, having a group of individual trusted advisors by itself is indeed not good enough if you aspire to build enduring *institutional* client relationships. Level 5 relationships are often limited to the service offerings that the particular trusted advisor knows well; and if he or she leaves the firm, the client may also leave. To reach Level 6, you have to create many to many relationships at multiple organizational levels, and apply the collective intelligence of the firm as opposed to that of just one brilliant rainmaker. Many clients are in fact demanding that their outside advisors become skilled at Level 6. Shell, for example, has reduced the number of law firms it uses from several hundred to about 15, which it calls “strategic law firm partners.”

7. If you boil it down, what are the ingredients of really breakthrough client relationships?

When you look at a broad sampling of Level 6 client relationships, there are a handful of commonalities. The quality of the work that's been delivered is always very high. Multiple individual relationships have been built—at many organizational levels—including with key economic buyers or decision makers. Often, the firm has worked with the client through a major crisis or turning point—the bond has been forged in fire. You also find that individual executives have benefited from the relationship on a personal level—their careers have been advanced, they have received excellent coaching from the outside advisor, and their own networks have been enhanced. Also, the issues being worked on are usually very strategic. It's tough to build a Level 6 relationship if you're focused on low-level issues or doing commodity work.

8. Are some clients just never destined for “trusted partner” status?

Many factors have to come together for a client relationship to evolve to a trusted partnership. The most important thing is that your main client has to be truly ambitious and view the work you are doing as forming part of a broader agenda he or she is trying to achieve at the company. The client also has to see value in forming long-term relationships with key advisors. GE, for example, tends to view bankers and consultants as commodities. It sends routine legal work to India, to be done by US-trained Indian lawyers, and often uses impersonal, web-based reverse auctions to get the lowest prices from professional service firms.

9. You say that clients are demanding more value from their relationships. What exactly are they looking for?

As part of my research for *All for One*, I routinely asked relationship managers—and their clients—about value. Not surprisingly, each client organization has a unique set of benefits that it seeks from a service provider. So the first step in creating value is understanding what the client really values. One client may seek quantifiable cost reduction; another, risk reduction; and yet a third, innovation. I have found that in the best Level 6 relationships, value is created along two distinct axes: Institutional versus personal, and tangible versus intangible. At the beginning of a relationship, the benefits sought are usually tangible and institutional in nature. Later, personal value also becomes important. Are the individual executives improving their skills and advancing their own careers? Finally, intangible value becomes part of the legacy of an advisor's work: Has the client's culture been strengthened? Have internal relationships improved? You have to deliver against all of these.

10. What surprised you in researching and writing *All for One*?

First, as I mentioned earlier, I was struck by how Level 6 relationships are very dependent on an overall set of organizational capabilities rather than just the skill of one brilliant relationship manager. One client I work with, a leading marketing and sales

consulting firm, has grown at more than 20% a year over the last ten years. They now have 1000 professionals. If you met some of their client account leaders, you would sense they are extremely competent and knowledgeable but you would not be bowled over by their individual “charisma.” Yet their culture is amazing in terms of the way they collaborate to serve major clients. The second thing that surprised me is the importance of focus. I always knew it was essential, but in case after case, I saw how major client relationships are built on an almost evangelical zeal and intense concentration of resources. Multi-million dollar relationships don’t become that large based only on good work—they require zealotry, commitment, and military-style planning.

11. Is it possible to develop and train professionals to lead these large, institutional client relationships, or do you have to simply find “naturals” with innate talent?

Some people are naturally good at building client relationships. They have strong emotional intelligence, are good big-picture thinkers, and have a passion for serving clients. If you dig down, however, there are three foundations of your capabilities with clients: Talent, Skill, and Behavior. Talent is innate, and it’s hard to improve dramatically—although recent books, such as Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers* and Geoff Colvin’s *Talent is Overrated*, make the case that *practice* is far more important than talent. Skills can certainly be improved, and behaviors can be modified and re-learned. So a pretty big part of the equation can be influenced. I have found that with the right training and coaching, many relationship managers who are performing at an average level can become very good if not excellent client leaders.