

The Roles and Skills of Successful Client Relationship Managers

By Andrew Sobel

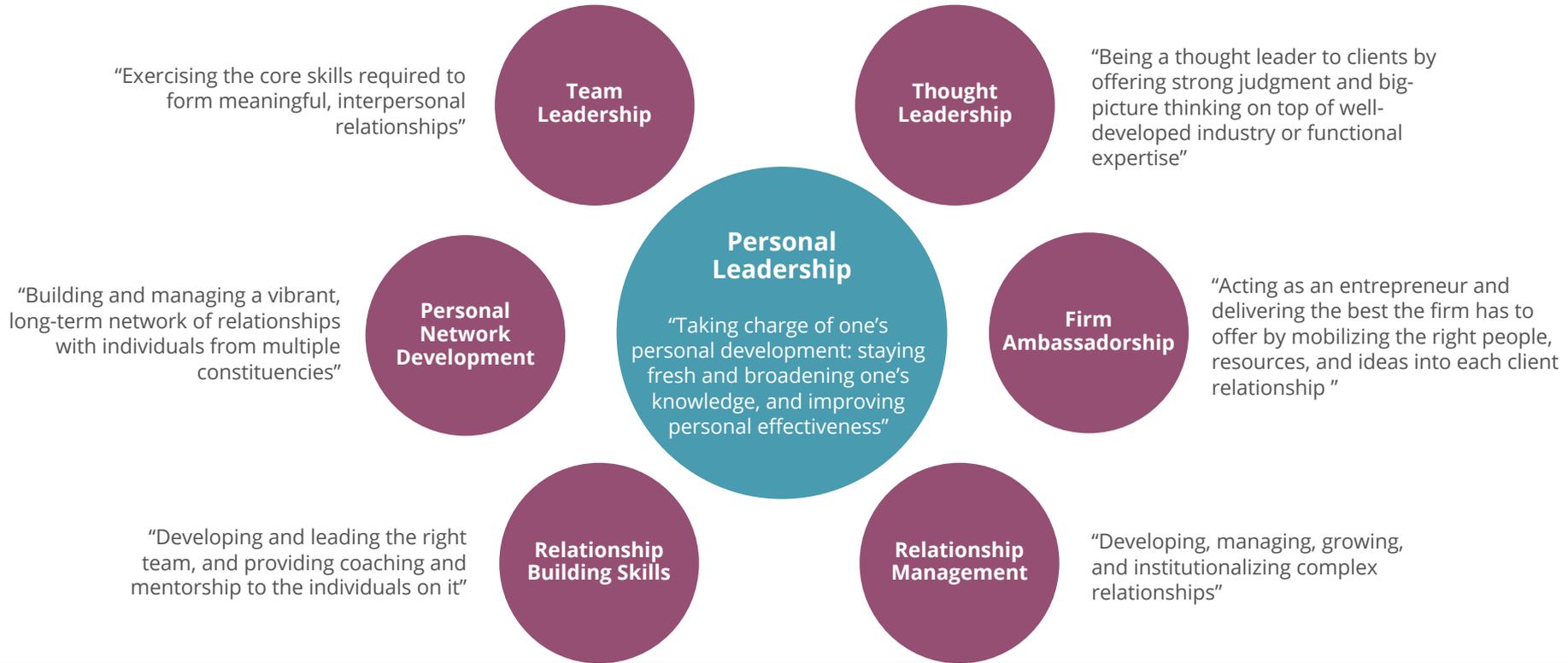
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Advisors

What are the essential roles of a Relationship Manager or Client Account Executive?

1. **Aspiration-Setting:** Sets bold aspirations—a clear vision—for the development of the relationship.
2. **Relationship Strategy:** Sets and executes a client relationship strategy that defines which issues to focus on, which opportunities to pursue, and which individuals to invest in.
3. **Team Leadership:** Creates, manages, and leads the team, providing appropriate coaching and mentoring along the way.
4. **Client Leadership:** Is perceived as a thought leader by senior client executives. Facilitates the development of a vision for the overall success of the company, business area, or function
5. **Ambassadorship and entrepreneurship:** Identifies, mobilizes, and delivers into the relationship the right people, solutions, resources, and ideas from across the firm.
6. **Commercial Management and quality control:** Successfully undertakes contract negotiations, ensures financial success, and monitors quality.

What skills enable relationship managers to fulfill these roles?



1. Relationship-Building Skills

“Demonstrates mastery of the core skills required to form meaningful interpersonal relationships”

Behaviors or indicators that would demonstrate mastery of Relationship-Building Skills:

- **Trust-building:** Able to earn trust in relationships with others by consistently demonstrating integrity (honesty, consistency, and reliability) and professional competence. Is squarely focused on helping others to achieve their agendas--their goals and aspirations. Always meets commitments.
- **Empathy:** Able to tune into other’s feelings, thoughts, and daily context. Acts in socially appropriate ways. Shows a genuine interest in other people. Asks good questions, and listens keenly. Able to adjust and adapt social style and communications (e.g., pace, flow, focus of a presentation).
- **Selfless Independence:** Balances dedication to clients with objectivity and independence. Always acts in the client’s best interest (except when to do so would cause significant harm to the firm). Willing to say “no” or to disagree on important issues.
- **Executive Relationships:** Has a track record of building strong relationships with executive decision makers and influencers. Has been able to evolve relationships--repeatedly--from Level 1 to Levels 4 and 5 (see next slide). Able to evolve a senior-level “contact” into a “client” for the firm.

2. Personal Network Development

“Develops and maintains a vibrant, long-term network of relationships with individuals from multiple constituencies”

Indicators that would demonstrate mastery of Personal Network Development:

- **Personal brand—being known for something:** Has developed an area or areas of expertise which are clearly recognized within the firm and in the client marketplace. Among clients, and perhaps in the broad marketplace as well, is seen as the “go-to” person for a particular service or set of services.
- **Core network:** Has build a set of core relationships within the firm, with decision-making executives at clients, and with other influencers/catalysts in business, government, and/or the community at large. Is tangibly able to use these relationships to gain referrals, references, and valuable introductions.
- **Sustaining:** Actively stays in touch with and maintains relationships with a set of core contacts. Knows how to add value to each relationship through an understanding of that person’s professional and personal goals and needs.
- **Traffic building:** Engages in regular traffic-building activities that reinforce personal expertise and the firm’s brand. (These traffic-building activities might include intellectual capital development, service offering creation, publishing and speaking, alumni networking, attendance at industry-focused events, development of academic relationships, and so on). Is able to consistently generate new opportunities with existing and/or new clients.

3. Team Leadership

“Assembles, leads, and manages successful project teams whose members learn and grow from the experience”

Indicators that would demonstrate mastery of Team Leadership:

- **Right team:** Puts together teams with the right mix of skills, experience, and backgrounds for each particular client and delivery challenge.
- **Coaching and mentoring:** Works with individual team members to encourage, motivate, and teach.
- **Delegation:** Delegates to team members, and creates an environment where they can take individual initiative and succeed.
- **Accountability:** Helps set goals and tasks for team members, and follows up.
- **Relationships:** Builds positive relationships with team members. Communicates regularly and effectively.
- **Positive experience:** Helps to create a positive, learning experience for each team member. Has a reputation as someone that professionals in the organization would like to work for.

4. Thought Leadership

“Is recognized by clients as a thought leader who offers strong judgment and big-picture thinking on top of industry or functional expertise”

Indicators that would demonstrate mastery of Thought Leadership:

- **Third-party recognition:** Has achieved acknowledged mastery of a particular function, sector, or other area of expertise. Is cited in publications (press, trade, client) and perhaps asked to speak and participate in public and private events (e.g., industry conferences, client offsites, etc.).
- **Sought after:** Clients actively seek out his views, and involve him in important strategic and operational discussions. Is also sought after by past clients and when in-between engagements, not just when there is a paying assignment.
- **Influence:** Through the strength of acknowledged judgment and expertise, is able to influence client’s perspectives, views, and decision-making.
- **Effective solutions:** Works with her team to craft tailored, innovative solutions that truly work for the client. Occasionally breaks the mold or goes against the grain and recommends something that pushes the client in a new or different direction. Willing to buck conventional wisdom.
- **Intellectual capital development:** Tangibly contributes to the enhancement of current service offerings and/or the development of new ones. With her team, creates knowledge that becomes part of the firm’s IC. Publishes and/or speaks to codify and communicate her ideas.

5. Firm Ambassadorship

“Delivers, as appropriate, the best the firm has to offer by mobilizing the right people, resources, and ideas into each client relationship ”

Indicators that would demonstrate mastery of Firm Ambassadorship:

- **Service offerings:** Has a broad understanding of the firm’s service and product offerings. Knows enough about what the firm does to represent that capability in first meetings, and to manage subject matter experts on a team.
- **Firm network:** Has developed a strong network of relationships within the firm. These would include relationships with key individuals in a variety of areas, such as practice/sector leadership, delivery capability, “branded expertise,” geography, and relationship management capability.
- **Firm first:** Can sell the firm as opposed to just herself. Demonstrates a belief that clients are clients of the firm and not owned by any one individual.
- **Sharing the relationship:** Demonstrates a willingness to allow others into the relationship. Actively seeks out and draws in colleagues who may, on an ad-hoc basis, help add value to the relationship.

6. Relationship Management

“Has a successful track record of developing, managing, growing, and institutionalizing complex relationships on behalf of the firm”

Indicators that would demonstrate mastery of Relationship Management Skills:

- **Winning the sale:** Is able to consistently convert leads into paid projects, programs, or transactions. Can analyze a client’s buying network and develop strategies to help meet each player’s business and personal wins. Mobilizes the right team and set of institutional resources for each sales opportunity. Successfully negotiates the commercial aspects of the contract with the client.
- **Many-to-many client network:** Works with his/her team to plan and build many-to-many relationships with the client. Creates multiple sponsors/supporters within the client organization, so that the departure of a single executive will not result in termination of the commercial relationship.
- **Account planning and development:** Together with the team, develops annual client plans. Meets periodically with the core team to review, reflect, and strategize about how to improve the relationship and serve the client. Seeks client feedback on the firm’s performance. Follows up on agreed actions and ensures team members meet their commitments.
- **Agenda setting:** Understands and can articulate the client’s most critical issues and challenges. Is forward looking--doesn’t just react to client requests, but actively works with the senior client to help define his/her agenda. By building trust, has earned a “seat at the table” for the firm when important strategic or operational issues are being discussed.
- **Value:** Forecasts, delivers, and communicates value to the client. Can articulate core value and personal value: Both how the team is delivering against contracted-for results, and also how the team is adding value to the key executives it is working with.

7. Personal Leadership and Effectiveness

“Takes charge of his/her personal development, and demonstrates effectiveness in self-management”

Indicators that would demonstrate mastery of Personal Leadership and Effectiveness:

- **Prioritization:** Is able to set priorities and stick to them. Creates a balance between meeting short term business needs and making long-term investments in activities such as relationship building, knowledge-creation and self-improvement. Has intense client focus and prioritizes time accordingly.
- **Time management:** Aligns time commitments to priorities. Makes time, regularly, for “important but not urgent” development activities. Able to delegate or eliminate activities to free up more time for key priorities.
- **Career management:** Takes the initiative in managing own career. Reaches out to seniors for coaching and mentorship. Willing to take calculated risks, in career path, which may broaden experience base.
- **Personal renewal:** Regularly seeks and takes opportunities to deepen and broaden professional skills. Willing to undertake new, different, and/or unfamiliar assignments and tasks. Demonstrates curiosity to learn and explore.
- **Firm contribution:** In addition to managing major client relationships, contributes to the life and culture of the firm.