

Relationship

Building and Managing



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By Doug Rothschild, SIOR

By now, almost everyone knows that the real key to a successful business is relationships, relationships, relationships. But it takes more than just having a relationship; true success lies in effectively managing that relationship. Quite often people refer to relationships and partnerships interchangeably, when in reality, there is an important difference. Typically a relationship has someone at the helm—a driving force—whereas a partnership is a collaboration. In a relationship, if you are the driving force, you are in control. You have the ability to guide the direction of the relationship and the level of your contribution to it. However, there are pluses and minuses to being that force. Relationships don't manage themselves. They require time, discipline, and a great deal of responsibility. To successfully drive, or guide, a client relationship, it is imperative to lay a solid foundation, manage expectations on an ongoing basis, set clear and definitive boundaries, and recognize the evolution of the relationship.

Laying the Foundation

Relationships don't happen overnight. They take time and energy, and need to be cultivated. For an introduction to grow into a

personal relationship, people want and need to feel a connection. The same holds true for business relationships. In a business relationship, there are many different ways to connect with someone. Many people look for similar personality traits and values. Others seek out common interests such as sports, music, or hobbies. Some people look for others who are involved in similar organizations, boards, and philanthropic groups or causes. Whatever the basis, you have to find common ground on which to build your relationship. It is also critical that you state your purpose. I'm not suggesting a formal document, but it's important for people to understand what you expect from them and what they can expect from you. Some relationships are for advisory and educational purposes. Some people have a great deal of knowledge and experience to share and are able to find those individuals who would benefit from and appreciate what they can offer. Many cultivate relationships in hopes of generating new business. Still others seek out certain relationships in order to become more involved in some group or issue—for introductions into other organizations or to other individuals. If you have an agenda

or purpose going into the relationship, declaring it at the outset will not only be appreciated, but it will also make you more likely to gain what you were initially seeking.

Managing Expectations

Once a foundation has been established and expectations have been set, one of the most important components of controlling a relationship is to properly manage expectations on an ongoing basis. More often than not, people tend to over-promise and under-deliver. It's usually not intentional, but it can happen because of a lack of information, an over-eagerness to please or satisfy, or a fear of being replaced. Whatever the reason, unmet expectations can do long-term damage to both new and established relationships. Successful relationships are built on trust, and trust is difficult to earn yet easily lost. By properly managing expectations—under-promising and over-delivering on a consistent basis—trust can be earned more quickly and maintained over time. When you use this tactic, people come to know that you can be counted on and that you are a reliable, dependable person whose word holds true.

Setting Boundaries

Once a foundation has been laid and trust has been earned by diligently managing expectations on an ongoing basis, many people find themselves in a vulnerable position. When people know they can count on you, they often (probably inadvertently) take advantage of you. Being in control of the relationship also means not allowing people to take advantage of you or your employees. Your job is to set clear boundaries of what is and is not acceptable. This could include types of projects accepted, the time you are or aren't available, tasks you are willing to take on—the list can go on and on. Your job is to decide what you will and will not do and then to enforce those boundaries. There are tactful ways to do this without damaging the relationship. By enforcing these boundaries, you eliminate situations where you might be taken advantage of, and you simultaneously earn a new level of respect for yourself and the relationship.

Keep in mind, however, that a large part of customer service lies in the recognition of those providers who are willing to go above and beyond the call of duty. Effective boundary setting and

enforcement includes identifying and understanding those instances in which flexibility is prudent and those instances in which it is unappreciated and/or unnecessary. There are some instances in which failure to uphold a set boundary could actually damage a relationship, such as by agreeing to do something that is out of your scope of service or to do something within too tight a timeframe. Recognizing your own limitations will always do a relationship more good than harm.

Recognizing Relationship Evolution

Despite the length or success of many fruitful relationships, they often fizzle out and slowly die away. It's not because any single individual did anything to cause the demise of the relationship. Rather, people failed to recognize that relationships have a natural evolution. The circumstance of a relationship on the first day will certainly not be the same as it is on 30th day, the 12th month, or the 10th year. Relationships evolve. People grow and change, and their needs change. Over the course of a relationship, what you can offer and what you will need will change. Your original purpose or agenda may be met early, but that doesn't discount the need for or value of the relationship. By recognizing this, you can leverage those changes to help continue and further develop the relationship, rather than allowing them to cause its demise.

Successful control of a relationship breeds more success and more relationships. As the driving force, you have the ability to be an advocate for your clients. You have an opportunity to help them develop new relationships that will benefit them and their business. By making these introductions, you have an opportunity to establish a network of relationships that can and will at some point return to benefit you. Each relationship has the potential to offer a new insight, new ideas, or new relationships. By capitalizing on all resources at your disposal, you are able to grow as a professional.

As individuals, we all yearn for meaningful, productive relationships, both personal and professional. But relationships require diligence and hard work to yield their full benefits for all involved. By laying a solid foundation, managing expectations, setting boundaries, and recognizing the natural evolution of your relationships, you will be the driving force behind your relationship success. 🚀