

What Clients Want

They want better leadership in professional services.



by Linda Julian

THERE IS NO SHORTAGE of knowledge on the principles and theory of leadership, or advice on corporate leadership. But excellent leadership in professional services is substantially about understanding, embodying and personifying all that clients and other seasoned professionals choose to follow.

Once viewed as a priestly caste with unassailable privileges, social status and economic advantage, professionals have now moved on. Great professional practices are built on behaviour—and the leadership choices and decisions professionals take substantially determine their destiny.

What clients want most. Fundamentally, clients want:

- leadership and expert help in solving their problems
- to be selectively sold professional services to help with their specific problems, challenges and opportunities
- to understanding how they benefit from their professional advisers
- to leverage the benefits their professional advisers deliver to them
- to know they are getting 'a little extra' than just the routine treatment
- assistance in engaging expert help
- expert professional passion applied in their interests

With these points in mind, it's the quality of the relationship with a professional adviser which so often determines the success for both parties.

Reliability builds trust. Trust, crucial for effective and long-lasting relationships with clients, is the product of:

- predictability and dependability
 - understanding, acceptance, empathy
 - candor, forthrightness, authenticity
- Trust builds over time. Having shared experiences and values takes trust to a higher level. Being trustworthy is the foundation of trust.

Clients rely on what a professional says and does to decide whether that professional is worthy of their trust.

To convey trustworthiness, professionals must:

- do what they say they'll do

- take action within agreed timeframes
- consistently meet deadlines
- keep to commitments
- always follow-through to check that things have gone well
- take responsibility to deliver the solutions offered or promised

Consistently behaving in these ways builds trust with valued clients and underpins professional leadership.

Conversely, trust will be eroded by:

- not taking enough time to understand the client and their wider business and social environment
- focusing on their errors, poor decisions or historical problems
- attacking previous sources of advice and counsel
- providing answers without taking time to appreciate 'why' and 'what'.



Authenticity and frankness build trust. Humans have remarkable capacities to work out who's on the level, who's not being completely frank or straightforward, and who's not telling them the whole story.

Strong client relationships depend on the trust that develops in an open, frank, authentic environment. This goes beyond mere technical honesty, and may at times call for the courage and gumption to speak frankly.

Professionals can build trust and better serve their clients, by:

- saying what they think and believe
 - when necessary, giving the bad news clearly and unequivocally
 - not hiding unpleasant facts, issues, possibilities or implications
 - not playing political games
 - admitting when they make an error, get it wrong or change their mind, and
 - being clear about their limitations
- Showing your authentic, multi-

faceted self to a client is not to be feared or avoided—professionals are far more believable and trustworthy leaders when they show that they're absolutely straightforward, forthright, and don't shy away from bad news.

Acceptance and empathy build trust. It is often easy for professionals to see the foolishness, errors and poor choices that may have disadvantaged a client or led to some awful predicament.

Professionals communicate acceptance and empathy to clients when they:

- respect their point of view
- explore the impact of the situation
- reassure them of their genuine concern, interest and ability to assist
- avoid any temptation to remind them that had they enlisted your support earlier, they wouldn't be in this (undesirable) situation
- constantly emphasise readiness, willingness and enthusiasm to help

Clear the way to build trust as your willingness to help is put into action in the client's interests.

Reinforce trust. Trust won't be built by just doing—even if very well—a few of these items. Trust grows from the interplay of openness and authenticity, acceptance and empathy, and reliability. How you put all these ingredients together will determine the extent and quality of the trust you establish with a client, and your status as a leader.

Every so often, take stock and evaluate your behaviours, based on:

- being able to say what you believe, convincingly and completely
- telling clients the truth
- doing what you say you'll do—avoiding hypocrisy or double standards
- consistently following through on offers, commitments and promises
- being tactful, sensitive and kind to clients, but telling it like it is
- not avoiding conflicts, smoothing things over, or telling part-truths only to have it all catch up eventually
- advising your clients as you would expect and hope to be advised on matters in which you are not an expert.

A professional entrusted with the privilege of applying their expert passion in their client's interests will gain at least as much as they give.

And true leadership in professional services is all about exercising expert passion in the interests of clients. **LE**

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ACTION: Be a trustworthy professional.