

## Building trust

By Linda Julian

Trust is crucial to effectiveness and longevity of relationships between expert professional advisers and quality clients. Because trust depends on

- reliability
- acceptance and empathy
- openness and authenticity

it is rarely "instant", and generally builds over time.

Being trustworthy is at its foundation.

### **Reliability builds crucial trust**

Because your clients aren't God and can't read your soul, they have to rely on what you say and do to work out whether you're worthy of their trust.

Do you:

- Do what you say you'll do?
- Take action within agreed timeframes?
- Consistently meet deadlines?
- Keep any commitments you're made to follow up?
- Habitually follow through to check that things have gone well?
- Deliver the solutions you offered, promised, or led clients to believe you could deliver?

The right answer to each of these questions is "yes".

Check that you're consistently behaving in these ways to build trust with your valued clients.

### **Acceptance and empathy build crucial trust**

For an expert professional, it's often easy to see the foolishness and errors which have disadvantaged a client or led to their awful predicament which you're now about to get right.

Strengthening trust with clients may be undermined by:

- being unduly critical
- attacking selection of previous advisers
- not taking time to hear them out
- not understanding their priorities and concerns.

Communicate your acceptance and empathy by:

- respecting your client's point of view
- exploring the impact of the situation on them
- reassuring them of your genuine concern and ability to assist
- avoiding any temptation to remind the client that you wouldn't have let the situation develop if consulted earlier
- emphasising your willingness to help.

This way, you won't create an impression that you think your client foolish or inferior, and clear the way to build strong trust as your willingness to help is put into action.

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### **Authenticity and frankness build crucial trust**

Humans have well developed "crap detectors": some 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, and truly authentic dynamic.

This goes well beyond mere technical honesty - and may at times call for the courage and gumption to speak fiercely.

An expert professional can go a long way to building trust - and truly serving his/her client - by:

- saying what you really think and believe
- when necessary, giving the bad news clearly and unmistakably
- not hiding unpleasant facts, issues, or possibilities
- telling your client when they're wrong
- admitting when you've made an error, got it wrong, or even changed your mind
- being clear about your limitations.

Showing the authentic, real you to your client is not to be feared or avoided - you'll be far more believable and trustworthy when you show that you're absolutely straightforward and don't shy away from bad news.

### **Reinforce crucial trust**

Trust is absolutely key to successful and enduring client relationships. It won't be built by just doing - even if ever so well - a few of the items covered in eTips over the last three weeks.

Rather, trust grows from dynamic and complex interplay of:

- reliability
- acceptance and empathy
- openness and authenticity
- clear communication and fierce speaking.

How you put all these ingredients together determines the extent and quality of trust you establish with your clients.

Every so often, take stock. Evaluate based on these dimensions:

- you say what you believe
- you tell clients the truth - the real story
- what you say is what you do
- you follow through on your offers, commitments, and promises
- you are tactful and kind to clients, but never shy away from telling it like it is and giving clients bad news
- you do not avoid conflicts or smooth things over only to have it all catch up eventually
- you advise your client as you would expect and hope to be advised, if tables were turned.

Lasting, productive client relationships are built on trust.

To earn trust, above all, be trustworthy.

### **About the author**

Linda Julian is acknowledged as a leading authority on strategic practice development and how to win business for law firms. Since 1979, she has consulted with lawyers and other professionals throughout Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific, and Asia on a wide range of business acquisition, client retention, and strategic management issues.

Her book *The Passionate Professional: creating value, success, and prosperity* has sold in 13 countries and has received wide acclaim. Linda lectures in strategic management and marketing professional services at post-graduate level. She leads the small and highly specialised Julian Midwinter & Associates consulting practice.