

Managing Client Crises

By Andrew Sobel

I recently interviewed a client of mine on the topic of client crises, in preparation for a program I was designing for her organization. “Do you have all night?” she asked, laughing, “They’re continuous!”

Every professional who works with clients faces periodic crises or “rough patches” in his or her relationships—it’s inevitable. Because of the complex nature of human interaction, not every client is going to be deliriously happy with you and your work, all of the time. I face these speed bumps myself, regularly, and I have to admit they make the perfectionist in me very uncomfortable (I think, naively, “If you’re always trying to do your best, shouldn’t things always be perfectly smooth?”)

Let’s look at different types of client crises, and some principles for dealing with them.

The first distinction you need to make is whether it’s YOUR crisis or the CLIENT’S crisis.

Examples of a crisis that’s *yours*:

You’ve overcommitted yourself and are having trouble meeting client expectations

You’re tired, bored, sick, depressed, or otherwise unmotivated to engage with your clients and your work

Your clients are making fairly normal demands on you, but for various reasons you feel that it’s too much and you’re tired of being “imposed upon.”

You are having a crisis in your personal or family life.

If the crisis is yours, then you may not even need to involve your client in solving it, except perhaps from a logistical standpoint (e.g., you need a breather or an extension).

This is an important distinction. When you are out-of-balance or stressed, it’s easy to feel that clients are being unreasonable or just plain wrong.

If it’s your crisis rather than the client’s crisis, the solutions may include:

Taking time off to rest and regain your perspective. Are you working on weekends? Give yourself a full two-day weekend without checking email or doing client work. Better: Occasionally take a 3- or 4-day weekend.

Venting to someone you trust.

Working on improving your schedule three or four months out. If things are out of control now, you probably

can't do much about it in the short term. But you certainly can influence next quarter, today, with some more disciplined planning.

Getting an extension from one of your clients. Chances are you are working on something, for someone, that can wait an extra week or two weeks.

Crises that directly involve your client or are precipitated by your client can come in many shapes and forms. Sometimes, it has to do with direct dissatisfaction with the work product. Here are some recent examples of this, cited by my own clients:

A litigation attorney gets an unfavorable ruling in a trial.

An investment banker is unable to find a buyer for a division that his client wants to sell.

A consultant recommends a reorganization, and implementing it turns out to be much more difficult than anyone expected.

Software does not work as promised, and the client experiences constant outages or systems failures.

On other occasions, the crisis may be subtler or may involve complex interpersonal dynamics. Here are some real examples:

You are working with an executive whose boss is your client. You are critical of that executive's performance—as it relates to his role in your project—and your client, unexpectedly, severely chastises his subordinate. The subordinate, with whom you have to work to get the project done, is now livid and hostile towards you.

Your client is arrogant, overly demanding, and hard to work with. Slowly, over time, your face time diminishes because you find him so difficult, and communications become stilted. The client begins to think you no longer care about his business, He starts bad-mouthing you out in the marketplace.

You give your client blunt, honest advice, advising her not to take certain courses of action. Over time, she drifts away from you, and begins relying on other, competing professionals who are more agreeable to her direction. You feel like you're getting punished for your honesty and independence.

Every situation is a little different, and I'm not going to even try to suggest the specific solutions to these crises in this newsletter. In fact, very often THERE ARE NO SOLUTIONS to these crises—the solution lies in the way you go about addressing the client's concern.

Here are some general principals that can guide us:

- **Responding rapidly.** If a client is unhappy, deal with it immediately. Don't make an appointment in three weeks to discuss it. Your willingness to drop what you're doing to immediately and speedily discuss your client's concerns—by demonstrating that you care and will listen—will by itself improve the situation. Sometimes, the client simply needs to hear, "What you think is very important to me and I

want to (take the next flight/drive 2 hours/use up my Sunday morning/etc) to meet with you and discuss this.”

- **Listening without being defensive.** When someone is upset, they want you to listen and empathize without passing judgment on what they have said. The worst thing you can do is start to listen and then slowly begin to counter what your client is saying—e.g., “Well, you’re right that we were not very inclusive of Bill but after all he did a terrible job so it’s not unexpected that we’d react that way, it’s only normal...” Listen deeply, and thank your client for sharing her thoughts with you.
- **Saying you’re sorry.** Even if you think the blame is equally spread, apologizing can help to defuse the situation and begin a new dialog. It’s hard to keep kicking someone when they apologize to you.
- **Offering amends.** If in fact you have done something egregious or have failed in some way, it can help to offer some amends. A client of mine told me how one of his clients recently went into a rage over an invoice that he received. He felt it was totally unjustified. In reality, some good, honest work had been done and the invoice was appropriate. But my client had done a very poor job of communicating just how complicated this small piece of work was going to be. My client immediately offered his client a substantial fee credit towards their next engagement. The angry executive was delighted over this, and the incident was over almost immediately. In fact, the relationship was strengthened.
- **Avoiding excuses.** This goes along with not being defensive. It’s very natural to want to explain to the client all the reasons why you are not at fault. Once you have defused the anger or other upset emotions, you may very well be able to have this discussion. But don’t lead with excuses.
- **Anticipating crisis.** If you speak frequently to your client and have lots of open communication, you will be able to head off many crises. If there is an atmosphere of openness between you, there’s a greater likelihood that your client’s concerns will surface when they are baby concerns rather than when they grow into monsters.
- **Getting it out into the open.** When negative emotions are kept in the dark, they fester and grow. When you get them out into the light of day, they shrink and often disappear. Go for transparency with your clients. If you know there is a sticky issue they are upset about, try to confront it openly and get it out on the table.

The best illustration of this idea is a wonderful poem by William Blake (1757-1827), called “The Poison Tree.” Read this insightful poem by one of the great English romantic poets:

A Poison Tree

by William Blake

I was angry with my friend:

I told my wrath, my wrath did end.

I was angry with my foe;

I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,

Night & morning with my tears;

And I sunned it with my smiles

And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,

Till it bore an apple bright;

And my foe beheld it shine,

And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole

When the night had veil'd the pole:

In the morning glad I see

My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree

In the end, I think these are pretty good principles to follow not just with clients but also in our dealings with family and friends.

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