

How do I connect with a client who just won't engage with me?

Question

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Answer

Occasionally you will encounter a client who is very standoffish. This is not an uncommon situation, and it's certainly not the end of the world when it happens. When you have a prospect or client who is aloof and won't engage with you, there are two possible reasons behind their behavior:

- The client has not developed enough trust in you—and/or your firm—to feel comfortable opening up and getting personal.
- The client, because of their particular character and personality, does not build close relationships with outsiders or possibly with anyone at work.

You can do something about the first case, but in the second, it's unlikely that you are going to change someone's basic nature. However, you may end up choosing to limit the number of clients like this who you are willing to work with on a long-term basis. Here are some suggestions for dealing with both of these situations:

- First of all, temper your expectations and remember that the outside advisor is usually more eager to develop a personal relationship than the client is. A large project or transaction may be extremely important to you, and it may consume the majority of your time for a period of weeks, months, or even years. Naturally, you want to have a great relationship with your client. For a senior client executive, however, your engagement may represent only a fraction of their responsibilities, and developing a relationship with you may not be a priority at all. Sometimes, relationships are asymmetrical in this respect.
- Remember that different people develop trust and confidence at different speeds. I have known some clients with whom I immediately clicked, and within a few weeks or months we had already progressed to what I call a Level 5 Trusted Advisor relationship. Others have required a year or two of working together to reach this stage. So be patient.
- If you think someone is congenitally capable of developing a strong relationship with you, but for some reason the trust is still not there, then you have to question whether you have really done your job. Have you really identified a vital interest, need, or goal that the other person has, and contributed to it?
- Try to change the setting. Your client may be someone who is quite formal with people in an office setting, but who can then relax and let their hair down a bit over a drink or nice meal in a restaurant.