

## **Building Strong Client Relationships**

**By Lin Gensing-Pophal, May 2006**

*[From the SHRM Consultants Focus Area]*

Working with a new client requires building trusting relationships--quickly. The more efficiently consultants can develop relationships, with the hiring manager as well as with other staff, the more successful the project outcome will be. What strategies do successful consultants use to establish strong relationships with clients and client staff members? Donna Flagg is the principal of The Krysalis Group, an HR and management consulting firm in New York City. The four most important lessons she has learned about breaking into the consulting business, she says, are:

- Talk to everyone you can about your business.
- Find out if the people you're talking to know any other people who would be willing to talk with you.
- Don't be afraid to ask people who know your work for recommendations/referrals.
- Don't rely on word of mouth alone. Balance your marketing efforts with other media, such as online resources, networking events, media coverage, conferences, etc.
- And, of course, treat every new contact as an important relationship.

Strong relationships, says Flagg, require trust. And, she adds, "what I find amazing is how long it takes to build trust--it's your pattern of behavior that people come to rely on and it's not a pattern until you have time to build it."

The trouble is that many consultants, particularly new consultants, or even seasoned consultants working with new clients, don't have the luxury of time to build strong relationships. They need to hit the ground running.

Allyson Lewis, author of the upcoming book *The Seven Minute Difference: Small Steps to Big Changes* (Kaplan Publishing, 2006) and a motivational speaker and consultant,

advocates appealing to the senses to establish strong bonds. Stop taking your clients to lunch, says Lewis, and begin bringing them to you.

When Lewis brings clients in to lunch she always offers the same meal--spaghetti, a "really healthy salad," and "this wonderful bread that smells so good it just makes you die." When clients arrive, they "don't see the food, but they smell the food as soon as they walk in." Then, they're "served."

This combination of inviting smells, and the experience of being "served," says Lewis, "literally anchors the emotion of pleasure with you--that's a psychological fact. A month, later they're not necessarily going to remember the conversation they had with you--but they are going to remember you and they'll think, 'I really like that person.' "

Beyond those initial impressions that truly do make a difference and get the relationship off on the right foot, successful consultants say that credibility and attentiveness are keys to ensuring a strong, ongoing relationship.

"People who are in need of professional consulting services, may like to buy, but they do not like to be sold to," says Steve Katz, author of *Lion Taming: Working Successfully with Leaders, Bosses and Other Tough Customers* (Sourcebooks, 2004).

"Unfortunately, too many consultants appear to have attended the 'know your stuff and show your stuff' school of executive training, which is an instant turnoff to people," Katz says.

Consultants can have very thriving careers based on solid credentials--like "Ph.D.s in industrial psychology and the ability to speak the HR language," agrees Phyllis Roteman, president of The Loyalty Group. But, managers overseeing HR or training development want a consultant they feel comfortable putting in front of their staff. A former associate

with the consulting firm Development Dimensions International, Roteman has refined and delivered sales and performance management training across a variety of industries.

Competence is obviously a must. It is the key that gets you in the door. But, just as when hiring staff people, strong technical skills and competencies must be tied to solid interpersonal skills.

The first step is "doing your homework"; far too few consultants prepare, Roteman says. "It always surprises me when I work with consultants and they go in and they're really not prepared. They just assume they know what they're doing, because they've done it before."

Before Roteman goes into a new client situation, she researches the company so she knows who the players are and who she is going to interact with. "I want to know who are the people in the room, how are they going to feel about the topic, who's going to be resistant, who's really gung-ho," she says, adding that these basic sales techniques are critically important to establishing relationships.

When meeting with a potential client, the consultant needs to focus all attention on the client's concerns and deliver what it is asking for. At that point in time the client is the most important thing in the world to the consultant. Not the phone. Not e-mail. Not a BlackBerry. Focusing on them requires listening--a far more critical skill than speaking.

Knowing much, but saying little, can help consultants go far, says Roteman, who admits she suffered from a bit of "know-it-all" behavior in her early years as a consultant. "You want to go in and prove how valuable you are when you meet people in the organization, but a lot of consultants end up talking too much and telling too much."

Roteman's sales background has taught her many valuable lessons, including: "When you're telling and talking people often tune out. When you listen and ask questions, they'll think you're brilliant." Roteman has been on sales calls and interviews where all

she's done is ask a lot of questions and that, in itself, has helped to cement the relationship and establish her as an "expert." You have to "earn" the right to speak, she says, and that means spending some time listening and learning to ensure that your words of wisdom are aligned with the client's needs.

That is a strategy supported by Katz. Even if a consultant is asked to introduce him or herself and provide some background on your qualifications and experience, they need to keep it short, he says. "Answer the question, but in an abbreviated version and quickly get to the questions of: 'What's keeping you up at night?' and 'If you could snap your fingers, how would things be different tomorrow?' "

Keith Rollag, a professor at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., does research on newcomers--specifically new hires to organizations--and agrees that asking insightful questions is a good way to establish credibility. "A few insightful questions will do more to establish your credibility than describing your background and qualifications, Rollag says. "By asking questions and listening intently to the responses, you show respect," he says. More importantly, researchers have found the fastest way to build a friendly relationship with someone "is to listen to them talk about themselves."

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