ADVERTISING AGE

Professional pitfalls

Book excerpt: Two management advisers offer help in sidestepping land mines and client traps

In their new book "Clients for Life," management advisers Jagdish Sheth and Andrew Sobel identify seven core attributes that a professional needs to develop in order to evolve from being an expert for hire to becoming an extraordinary adviser. In this edited excerpt, the authors offer ideas for avoiding the land mines in client relationships.

By the middle of the sixth century B.C., King Croesus of Lydia had become an extraordinarily wealthy man. His kingdom—in what is today western Turkey—was the first in the ancient world to issue and use metal currency, and the accompanying economic boom filled his coffers with gold. He had a dilemma, however: The Persians, his neighbors, were constantly threatening his empire. Croesus wondered if he should take the offensive and pre-emptively invade Persia.

Pondering this question, he resolved in 555 to send envoys to Delphi in Greece to ask the famed oracle for advice. He knew he would receive sage counsel from the oracle. After all, generations of leaders in the ancient world had regularly made the pilgrimage to consult with the resident priestess at Delphi.

After a journey over sea and land of nearly a month, Croesus' envoys arrived at the mountainous sanctuary of Delphi. Early one morning, accompanied by an entourage of priests and guards, they made their way into the temple of Apollo where the priestess gave her consultations. They paused upon entering to read the inscription etched over the entrance: Know thyself.

First, they bought sacred cakes and offered them at the altar near the entrance. Next, they sacrificed a goat on the hearth of the inner room. Finally, they were led into the inner sanctuary where they waited in silence for the priestess to speak.

Sitting on a small seat suspended within a large tripod and concealed behind a curtain, she had been inhaling the vapors from a cauldron of laurel leaves for several hours and was by now in a state of complete delirium from the hallucinogenic effects of the medicinal plant. She began mumbling incoherently. The envoys listened in rapt attention, although her words were incomprehensible. The chief interpreter, who stood in front of the curtain, was responsible for translating what the priestess had said. He turned to them and spoke:

"I know the number of the sands and the measure of the sea. I understand the dumb and hear him who does not speak. If you attack Persia, you will destroy a great empire."

When word was brought back to Croesus, he was elated. The oracle had spoken—victory would be his! He and his advisers began plotting a military campaign against the Persians in which Lydia would form alliances with Babylon, Egypt and Sparta. He would crush the Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great.

The oracle was, of course, correct: If Croesus attacked the Persians, a great empire would indeed be destroyed. Croesus had forgotten to ask, however, which empire would fall. His Persian campaign was a disaster. After a failed invasion attempt, Cyrus pursued Croesus to Sardis with a superior army, caught him by surprise and demolished his forces.

Soothsaying, prior to the scientific revolution, was a major source of advice. Wealthy ancients made the trip to Delphi, and less affluent ones looked for signs about the future in animal offal. The Chinese used to read the cracks in heated tortoise shells. To the 21st century mind, the story of the oracle at Delphi may seem vaguely humorous, yet who is to say that her predictions were any less good than those of many modern prognosticators? The Croesus episode does, however, hint at several of the pitfalls faced by modern advisers and their clients.

Providing services and advice to demanding clients has never been easy. Lawyers, consultants, accountants and others are frequently the target of mean, condescending humor, yet in reality their work is very difficult. Extensive travel, long hours and demanding clients are just the start of it. Many of the services that professionals offer—consulting and advertising, for example—are discretionary, and a client can decide to drop them at any time.

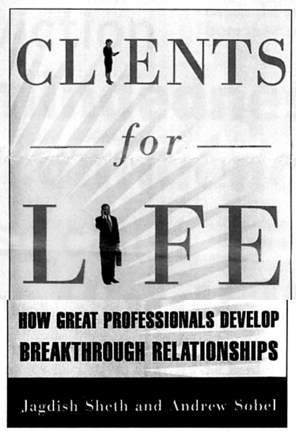
Often, clients feel that they have their own expertise in your field, and they constantly challenge your views. This can be healthy, but it can also diminish respect for your knowledge and experience as a professional. Linda Srere, chief client officer for advertising giant Young & Rubicam, tells this story about client "expertise":

"I was attending a conference at a hotel, and early one morning I went to the spa. While I was waiting for my treatment, the man in front of me struck up a conversation. When he learned I worked in advertising, he asked if I was familiar with a certain ad campaign, which I was. He then told me that he was the chairman of the company that made the product. And did I know who created this award-winning campaign? 'That little lady over there,' he said. 'My wife. It was all her idea.'

"The idea may in fact have been his wife's, but the point is that everyone thinks he knows something about our business. Clients hire us for our expertise and knowledge, but then they don't recognize it."

Even the best professionals occasionally find themselves in awkward situations with no easy way out, or at the beck and call of difficult clients they wish would go away. Based on our discussions with many extraordinary professionals and demanding clients, as well as on our own experiences as advisers, we've identified the most important pitfalls for professionals.

The talents, skills and attitudes of great professionals neatly combine into a powerful whole when they are expressed with balance and moderation. When individual attributes are taken to either negative or positive extremes, however, the result is dysfunctional and even neurotic behavior. The trick is to achieve equilibrium. Let's examine each attribute in turn:



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Selfless independence is by definition a delicate balance between client dedication and detachment. When this balance is not achieved, professionals veer toward one extreme or the other. If you are too selfless, you become subservient to your clients and can be exploited by them. If you are overly independent, you become aloof and detached and never develop the collaborative aspects of the relationship. You go back to being a mere purveyor of expertise rather than a broad-based adviser.

When **empathy** is in balance you are able to tune into your client's feelings, thoughts and context. You have an attitude of healthy humility; you demonstrate strong self-awareness and self-control; and you benefit from well-honed listening skills. When you have too much empathy, you overly identify with your client. Your judgment gets clouded because you're worried about hurting your client's feelings or upsetting him. You lose your objectivity. If you have too little empathy, on the other hand, you become insensitive, and you stop learning.

A deep generalist in balance is a professional with a passion for learning, who has great expertise in one subject but also deep **knowledge** about his clients, the industries he works in and the business functions that influence his work. He engages in extensive exploratory learning and uses multiple learning methods to deepen and broaden his knowledge base.

When learning becomes superficial or overly broad, however, there is imbalance. You become a dilettante, someone who has a superficial knowledge of many things with no deep expertise. You are full of clever management sound bites, such as "underpromise and overdeliver," "empowerment is critical" and "cash is king," but there is no depth of understanding behind the concepts. At the opposite extreme, you can become overly specialized and never break out of the prison that is your narrow expertise.

If you have a positive imbalance of **synthesis**—too much big-picture thinking—you develop a generalized understanding of the problem with no appreciation of the details. You tend to issue sweeping platitudes rather than specific recommendations. Clients feel you're "up at 35,000 feet" when they need a close-up view as well. You tell your client, for example, that he's got to "leverage key resources," and he walks around for days wondering exactly what that means and how to do it. If you undertake too little synthesis, you'll remain forever at the level of analysis. You'll never see the forest for the trees.

When a professional has balanced **judgment**, he carefully blends facts, experience and personal values to arrive at sound decisions. He avoids the many traps, such as overconfidence and groupthink, that can cloud the judgment of both professional and client. He neither shoots from the hip nor overanalyzes the situation.

When judgment is out of balance, the tenden-

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Close client calls

BOOK EXCERPT *from Page 54*

cy is either to become paralyzed or to rush to judgment too quickly. Professionals and clients whose judgment is paralyzed typically want to analyze everything to death. They insist on having all the facts before they feel comfortable making a decision. At the other extreme are the advisers who have an opinion on everything and make rapid-fire but flawed judgments. They're cocky and overconfident.

Strong, genuine **conviction** that is balanced drives extraordinary performance. It is rooted in deeply held beliefs and values and an accompanying sense of mission. Conviction is reinforced by empathy for your audience, communications skills and personal energy. It's bounded by your integrity—you have conviction for the things you truly believe are right, rather than what's expedient at that moment. Too much conviction results in closed-mindedness, dogma and overconfidence. Clients also call it "bull." It's the professional who is, in the words of Jim Robinson, former CEO of American Express, "100% sure but only 70% right."

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Unbalanced, radical conviction, which is characteristic of religious and political fanatics, can turn into dangerous obsession. An imbalance can also occur when you have too little conviction. This results in insecurity and an inability to communicate and persuade.

When trust is in balance in a relationship, there is openness between professional and client. The professional demonstrates solid **integrity**—based on discretion, reliability, consistency and a clear understanding of right and wrong—as well as competence. He works to reduce the client's risk of trusting him.

An imbalance in trust can occur in several ways. One party may blindly trust the other, for example, without reciprocity, resulting in disillusionment and disappointment. Integrity can also be taken to extremes. An exaggerated sense of integrity can make you uncompromising and lead to a confusion between standards and principles. It's the difference between an unwillingness to lie (a principle that is part of your integrity) and insisting that your client always show up on time for meetings (a standard). A professional might quit a client engagement with great flourish, for example, claiming that she won't "compromise her integrity," when in reality it was her expectations or standards that were not precisely met.

Too little integrity—subtly cutting corners, convincing yourself of untruths, putting your needs first, engaging in secretiveness—is the other extreme to avoid.

Every professional, of course, will possess a unique blend of these attributes. Each of us will tend to develop certain ones more than others, and while in theory there will be an ideal point of balance, in practice there is a range of healthy expression for each one.

Traps to avoid

In addition to errors of imbalance that professionals can make as they develop and practice the seven attributes, there are frequent pitfalls and dilemmas in client relationships.

The wrong client. The right client is the individual who owns the problem at hand, can act on your recommendations and can authorize your fees or payments. Sometimes, several or more individuals fulfill these various roles; especially in a large organization, there may be no single executive who can do all these things.

Often, professionals end up with the wrong client during the sales process. A group of management consultants, for example, pitched a major restructuring project to a large retailing chain. They invested over $200,000 in preparing the proposal, visiting stores, doing financial analysis and holding meetings with various vice presidents and even the president. The chairman, who was a major shareholder, decided to go to the final presentation. Until then, however, he had been out of the picture entirely. All of the executives had assured the consultants that the project was "in their bailiwick" and that the chairman was not operationally involved in the company.

At the end of the session, which the consultants hoped would be the kick-off meeting for the multimillion-dollar project they had proposed, the chairman suddenly stood up and said, "There's no way we're doing this. I want my own organization to figure out a way to do this work without recourse to expensive outsiders." The consultants glumly filed out. They hadn't been working with the right client.

The wrong problem. In the early 1990s, the Greyhound Bus Co., in an effort to revitalize its operations, decided it needed to revamp all of its information systems and create an electronic reservations system. Advised by outside accountants and consultants, it spent millions of dollars and several years implementing the new systems.

Once in place, however, not only was the system full of glitches but it turned out that most of the company's passengers didn't need or want the system. They typically rode only one trip segment at a time and had no need for advance reservations for connecting buses. The real problem had to do with poor scheduling, dirty buses and ineffective target marketing, not technology.

The great client advisers we've studied constantly ask themselves: Am I working on the right problem? Have I defined the problem correctly?

The wrong adviser. Smart, well-educated professionals feel that they ought to have something intelligent to say about everything. The really smart ones, though, know when not to give advice, and they admit when there is a mismatch between their expertise and experience and the client's problem.

When we interviewed clients about their roles as advisers (many are directors of other corporations and, as experienced executives, are sought after for advice by a variety of people), most of them said that they refuse to give opinions on subjects they know little about and wished their professional advisers would do the same!

One of the best ways to earn respect and trust from a client is to be honest about your capabilities and to recommend other qualified professionals if you're not the right person for the job. If you're asked for advice on a subject, and you don't feel you can give a meaningful response, say so. By replying, "I need to think about that one" or "I know where I can get a good answer—let me get back to you," you increase, not diminish, your client's confidence in you.

Vicariously exercising power or expertise. Professionals sometimes invoke the name and authority of their client to obtain respect and support in the organization. At other times the client executive himself may use the expertise and opinion of the professional adviser to shore up his own position. When done excessively, this practice undermines both client and adviser.

A professional's authority in a client organization has to be based on respect for his knowledge and integrity, not awe or fear of his relationship with a senior executive. Similarly, if a client repeatedly leans too heavily on your expert opinion in public forums, it will eventually undermine—not reinforce—your prestige in the company.

Too much bad news. Strategy adviser C.K. Prahalad points out that clients have a limited "bandwidth for bad news." He tells us, "Very few executives have the stamina and ability to constantly push, year after year, the way General Electric CEO Jack Welch does—he's unique in this regard. At the CEO level, most players have one great performance in them. When they get toward the end of that performance, their bandwidth for bad news diminishes substantially. It's at the beginning, when they are receptive and open, that you can have the most impact."

In fact, virtually any client who is just starting out in a new position—not just a CEO—is more open to constructive criticism, new ideas and suggestions than she will be at the end of her tenure. You have to be able to gauge, therefore, where your client is in her overall career and how open she will be to your counsel. Another way of putting this is that you have to choose your battles carefully. You can't take on your client over every issue, else you risk winning the battle but losing the war. A client will put up only so long with a professional who does nothing but criticize and point out what's wrong.

Staying in a bad marriage. Sometimes the personal chemistry between professional and client is just plain lousy. You may have conflicting values, or your personalities may just be so different that you clash on even the smallest issues. Clients are like the rest of us—you will occasionally find some who are nasty.

If you find yourself in a bad relationship with a client, try to ascertain whether it's fixable—perhaps there is a misunderstanding that can be cleared up—or whether you are just incompatible. If it's the latter, develop a plan to move on or replace yourself as the lead professional on the assignment.

Accepting opinions and judgments at face value. Whenever a company collapses into bankruptcy, the finger-pointing quickly reaches a frenzied pace. No matter how obvious it appears in hindsight that facts were misrepresented, losses concealed and illicit practices condoned, no one—the company directors, the chairman, the CEO, the CFO, the controller and their outside advisers (accountants, lawyers, bankers, and so on)—ever seems to know anything about what is really going on. Behind this is often the facile acceptance of other people's opinions, judgments and representations of the facts.

Great professionals constantly challenge what they see and hear. They accept very little at face value, especially when it comes to people's character and competency.

Losing the support of the broader organization. Throughout history, advisers to kings have always walked a thin line between the security and power that derived from their relationship with the leader and the weakness and unpopularity that resulted from the enmity of the king's subordinates—the nobles and the population at large. Cardinal Wolsey, who was lord chancellor before Thomas More, was the son of a butcher. Because of his background, politics and strong influence over the king, the English nobles hated him.

The fact is, the closer you become to a particular executive you work with, the harder it is to also be effective with the broader organization. It's not just a question of envy. As you develop a close personal relationship with your client, the relationship changes in ways that make it hard to advise his subordinates as well. You become a trusted confidant of that individual, privy to highly confidential information.

Others may now hesitate to open up to you for fear that what they say may get passed on to their boss. Or they may ask you for advice, which poses a different dilemma: How much of what you know, in terms of confidential information your client has shared with you, do you bring to bear in the giving of that counsel?

There are other dangers, as well. For example, if you don't have broad support in the organization, it will be harder to get your ideas implemented, even if you have a strong, energetic client. And if your client leaves, so most certainly will you.

There is no easy answer here. If you work with organizations, you have to weigh your close personal and professional relationship with one client against the need to have multiple relationships. It means that at all times you have to strive to be an independent, honest broker who keeps confidences.

The worst thing you can do is try to vicariously project authority based on the relationship you have with your client. This will only confirm people's worst suspicions, and you'll quickly be isolated. □