CHAPTER 6 DO YOU REALLY WANT RELATIONSHIPS?

STRATEGY AND THE FAT SNOKER CHAPTER

Many people have built their past success... CONTINUE

B Y DAVID MAISTER

MANY PEOPLE HAVE BUILT THEIR PAST SUCCESS on having a *transactional* view of their clients, not a *relationship* one, and it is not clear that they really want to change. Stated bluntly, people may say that they want the benefits of romance, yet they still act in ways that suggest that they are really interested in a one-night stand. In romance, both sides work at building a mutually supportive, mutually beneficial relationship. They work hard to create a sense of togetherness, a feeling of "us."

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This romantic scenario is seemingly attractive, but when you look at the way most professionals deal with their clients, and how many clients deal with their professional providers, there's very little of it to be found. Most professional-to-client interactions involve little if any commitment to each other beyond the current deal. The prevailing principle is "buyer beware."

Although it is not an identical comparison, the difference between transactions and relationships is similar to the distinction between being an expert to one's client and being an advisor.

An expert's job is to be right—to solve the client's problems through the application of technical and professional skill. In order to do this, the expert takes responsibility for the work away from the client and acts as if he or she is "in charge" until the project is done.

The advisor behaves differently. Rather than being in the right, the advisor's job is to be helpful, and to provide guidance, input, and counseling to the client's own thought and decision-making processes.

Relationships can be scary, particularly if the parties rush too quickly into creating obligations that neither side is yet ready to accept. Both client and provider may be reluctant to commit until they have developed significant experience with each other. Growing relationships is very personal and intimate. You actually have to be interested in others, listen to what they say and care about, and pay attention to their moods and needs.

An expert's job is to be right—the advisor's job is to be helpful.

Few of these skills are required in a transaction. The transactional approach (focus on the getting the job done, not on the other person) allows you to remain detached and unengaged, which is very attractive to some people.

When client and provider become opponents, exaggeration, misrepresentation, selective disclosure of key information, and careful management of appearances become common on both sides.

Switching from a transactional to a relationship approach to business requires a revolution of attitudes and behaviors. Gradual change will not take hold, because everything people have learned through their successes in transactions may work against them in learning how to be good at relationships. The most successful Don Juans and Donna Juanitas are unlikely to make the best spouses.

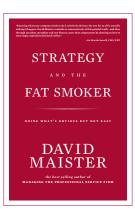
Although viewing dealings with clients or employees as a transaction is normal (and may be the most common form of interaction), there is a danger that continuing to view clients as "*them*" can degenerate into perceiving the client as the *enemy*. This can breed reactions that spiral into self-defeating behavior for both parties involved.

Once you are working with the client on the transaction, you have the opportunity to then take advantage of the client contact to build a relationship for the next time.

When client and provider become opponents, exaggeration, misrepresentation, selective disclosure of key information, and careful management of appearances become common on both sides. Both sides fight to be right and to prevail, rather than to collaborate on finding a solution.

A transaction is not necessarily a tragedy. As long as enmity does not build up, this approach can achieve great success. Once you are working with the client on the transaction, you have the opportunity to then take advantage of the client contact to build a relationship for the next time.

INFO



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Maister is widely acknowledged as one of the world's leading authorities on the management of professional service firms. For two decades he has acted as a consultant to prominent professional firms around the world, on a wide variety of strategic and managerial issues. In 2002, he was named as one of the top 40 business thinkers in the world (Business Minds, by Tom Brown, PrenticeHall/ Financial Times). He is the author of the bestselling books *Managing the Professional Service Firm* (1993), *True Professionalism* (1997), *The Trusted Advisor* (2000), *Practice What You Preach* (2001) and *First Among Equals* (2002). These books have been translated into 14 languages. For seven years, he served as a professor on the faculty of the Harvard Business School (1979-85), prior to launching his consulting practice. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

In March of 2005, he finally took his own advice, gave up smoking and lost 30 pounds.

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