

Getting relationships back on track

Your prospect and client relationships should keep getting better and better, but they probably don't. Handling plateaus or backsliding in relationships is hard for most professionals. Accepting stagnation or deterioration, as many professionals do, can cause you to unnecessarily lose a client or prospect. Responding correctly to a relationship challenge can make the relationship better than ever. But to handle the challenge you must understand what is going on.

Relationship challenges come in all sizes. They can be as small as a somewhat nasty comment by the prospect or client at a meeting. They can be as big as a client or prospect suddenly not returning any of your calls or emails. They can be someone saying "the price is too high" or "I'll have to think about that before I decide." Often, the relationship challenge is just a lack of forward movement. When there is a plateau or setback, you must diagnose. Is the cause:

- A service failure? Relationships falter when you don't meet client expectations (and you may not know all those expectations). Most professionals don't mess up their core work, but many fail on what they view as "little things." You might have been late, for example, with some work or to a meeting, or you or a colleague might have messed up some logistical arrangements, causing the client some grief.
- An underlying mismatch between what you offer and what they need? Maybe the client doesn't need what you offer, at the price you charge. They might, for good reasons, be looking for a set of skills that you don't have or for a very different level of service or quality than you provide. Many professionals incorrectly assume that all client or prospect problems are based on a business mismatch.
- A normal, common but counterintuitive reaction by the other person to a relationship that is going very well? Most people are ambivalent about a strong, close relationship in which they are listened to, respected, and responded to. Although such treatment is attractive, it is also very unfamiliar and profoundly unnerving to most people. If they are ambivalent, the other person will, at some point, push you away (or in an opposite move with the same result, they will withdraw from you). Pushaway responses aim, unconsciously, at derailing a growing relationship. Pushaways cause most relationships to develop as "two steps forward, and one step back".

If you've been consciously and steadily building the relationship, then you can usually safely assume it's a pushaway whenever you can't either identify a service failure (try asking!!) or a business mismatch the other person can explain to your satisfaction.

If you're facing a service failure, then apologize, fix the problem, and explain how you will make sure it will never happen again.

If the problem is an underlying mismatch, then stop working on (or pursuing work on) that business – you

are not, in fact, the right person for the job. Instead, concentrate on helping your client/prospect get the right resources to meet their needs. For example, you can refer them to another professional or organization.

If you are facing a pushaway, first acknowledge the content of the pushaway (so the person is certain they've been heard) and then focus on re-establishing the relationship connection that previously existed (and that still exists, once the pushaway is ignored). To do this, first remind yourself of your motive with respect to them – to help them reach their goals and be successful. This step enables you to recover the relationship connection, which is necessary if they are going to recover it too. Then, try one of several approaches:

- Restate your motive with respect to them: say you are interested in helping them reach their goals and be successful. Your statement – if it has been demonstrated in the past by your reflective listening and your actions – will help reestablish the connection that just got lost.
- Say something positive – tell them something you genuinely like about them. For example, refer to something they said earlier that impressed you, or something you have admired about their approach to business.
- Go back to a spot in the discussion where things were on track, and go deeper into that point. That will help you get back on the rails – together.
- Take a break – start up again in five minutes. Think about rejoining in a different place. (The walk to the soda or coffee machine is a good time to reestablish the relationship, with perhaps a comment about something that you have done, or will do together).

When you successfully steer someone back from a pushaway, you help them rejoin a relationship that is valuable for them. They have tried to shoot themselves in the foot by alienating you, and you have prevented the self-inflicted foot wound by not being driven off so easily. If they can see clearly (and sometimes they can) they'll see that you stuck around to help them even when they weren't being helpful to their own cause. And that's unusual and extremely valuable.

Something to try this week

Keep your eyes and ears open for potential pushaway reactions. When you are doing the right things with people (looking out for their interests, listening, being helpful to them), are you sometimes getting mixed reactions? Just noticing it is a good first step.

Once you've noticed, you can think about how to respond. Try hard not to get alienated (and irritated) and instead remind yourselves of your interest in their success. That's plenty for a start, and once you are re-oriented you'll probably discover that you have many ideas of how to proceed.

What are these tips?

These monthly tips are intended to help professionals create more business and enjoy their work more. We focus on how to start relationships, how to build relationships, and how to convert those relationships into sales.

Can you answer my questions about business development?

We'd be delighted. Please send any questions you have to questions@bridgewellpartners.com and we'll do our best to help you out. Or call us at 312-863-3489. Or visit www.bridgewellpartners.com to learn more about how we coach and train professionals to be better at business development and to enjoy it more.