BPTrends COLUMN

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When Clients Act like Jerks

One of the toughest challenges I have ever encountered as a performance consultant is dealing with unpleasant clients. There are countless ways a client can be difficult so I am narrowing this discussion down to those who do things not so much out of insensitivity, impatience or ignorance but with deliberate malice. This may seem an odd topic for a column on performance consulting but client relationships are critical to success. No matter how much skill or technical knowledge you may have, sometimes the key capability you need is the courage to face off against a client who is being unfair to you.

Using a few war stories from my own experience (I could go on and on, of course) I will focus on the kinds of behaviors that might make you question your choice of occupation and I'll offer a few remedies that may work in at least some situations.

All You're Ever Gonna Be is Mean

Taylor Swift wrote a song about every jerk in the world, and we all thought, "Take that!" We may yearn to exact such public revenge on folks who love to make us miserable, but jerks mostly get away with being jerks, especially if you happen to work for them. The option of quitting isn't necessarily easy or even possible, which is why jerks have the power they do. A consultant may have more freedom to just walk away from some situations, but it's not always that simple even for an independent contractor—we have to make a living too. So what can you do to save both your sanity and your job in the face of unreasonableness or downright meanness?

I started learning about how to contend with jerks while an employee because I worked for some. Like most people, I mostly tiptoed around them as much as possible but now and then a direct confrontation was inevitable. Here's an example:

Early in my career I was hired as a training manager at a bank. While searching for someone to hire, my future boss, the HR Director, found a contract instructional designer to begin developing some much needed training courses. Well and good, and I was okay with keeping the contractor in place to help out, but once I was on board, she and I eventually clashed over some of her choices. She went to the HR Director, who sided with her, and told me—gloatingly—to work it out.

It was a now-or-never moment. I knew if I didn't get some control over my own domain, I never would. Even at the risk of my job, I had to act. So I went back to the Director and made my case for why the contractor was messing things up. When the Director argued back, I gave my ultimatum: either the contractor goes or I go. And after some more pushback, she caved. I realized afterwards that she had more

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to lose than I did. She had hired me, after all. How would it look if I departed just weeks after starting?

Over time I learned other techniques for dealing with the Director. For example, whenever I suggested something to her one-on-one, she always rejected the idea. So I learned to bide my time and look for a chance to bring up the idea again, but this time when other senior people were present. More often than not, the idea got endorsed. After several episodes like this, the Director became wary of contradicting me at all. She was learning I could be persistent and just devious enough to set her on her guard. And I was learning how to cope with less than ideal circumstances.

Because, that's Why

When I went into consulting, I naively assumed that all consultants were masters of their destiny. No more jerks to contend with. But the reality is that you can still be subject to the whims of unreasonable people, and if you're not an employee, they don't even have to pretend to care about how you feel.

I first learned this reality while setting up project schedules with client teams. With one client, the 2-hour executive kickoff meeting had to begin at 7:30 a.m. Monday morning—had to, even though we did nothing else all that day. It puzzled me at first. The executive we were working with knew my project team members and I would have to fly in on Sunday from various places, disrupting our own weekends to accommodate him. So why insist on jerking us around? When it happened several more times, I began to suspect it was deliberate, and contained a message: I'm the boss and you're not, and don't forget it.

The worst instance of this behavior I experienced was with a high-profile client to whom we owed a final presentation before the kickoff of a project. At various times three of our partners had met with these folks, and the client insisted we all had to be there for the final presentation. ("You all have such different perspectives.") The thing was, two of the three partners were on vacation when this presentation was to take place, one with his family in the Grand Canyon and the other in a remote part of New Mexico. The third partner, whose client this was, was fully prepared to do the pitch, but she couldn't talk the client into being reasonable. So there we were at the client site to do a 60-minute presentation. It was during that meeting we found out that the client team members had been so insistent on meeting on this particular day because several of them had vacation plans they did not want to disrupt. I left there vowing never again to cave to such bullying. (For the record, we did that one project and then nothing else. Lots of promises, though.)

So what can you do about such behavior? When I worked for others, I generally just went along with the client's demands. It was not my client, after all, so I felt fairly helpless and seldom tried pushing back. But eventually I opened my own consulting business and I found I did have choices. What I started to do was make parts of my schedule untouchable, right up front as I was establishing the terms of the first consulting engagement. I offered to fly in to the client location on Monday morning and I would leave on Thursday afternoon or evening. Those were my terms, period. I did not argue or give longwinded explanations. I was simply unavailable at certain times.

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What I discovered to my great surprise—and relief—was that clients did not have a problem with my schedule, even clients who proved difficult in other ways. They did not pressure me to stay over "just this once" or complain that I was difficult to reach sometimes. In fact, one client even changed the start time of their weekly Monday morning staff meeting so that I could fly in and attend.

I gradually realized that bullying happens because you let it happen. Certain people are very good at discerning timidity or desperation in others, and they will take full advantage. What you may regard as your flexibility they interpret as weakness. Being firm but businesslike quickly puts you in control of the situation, and of your schedule.

Of course, I was not completely inflexible. Once I had a good relationship established with a client, I made exceptions to my own rules to accommodate the busy schedules of others, including staying over on weekends when it made sense instead of flying home and back. But I was still in charge of my own time and I made exceptions only when I wanted to.

Free Range Vultures

The third type of jerk you might have to confront sooner or later is the social climber, a person who sees what you're doing as an opportunity to enhance his or her own career. In a consulting situation, this is not the senior leader for whom you are doing some kind of work but an underling who gets attached to you somehow, sometimes as an apprentice or as a subject matter expert, or sometimes the person just sees what you're doing and engineers interactions that grow into a constant presence.

It can be great to have an insider working with you, especially if you're in an unfamiliar company or industry and it can be gratifying to coach someone who genuinely appreciates learning from you. But such relationships can turn out deadly if this person does not have your best interests in mind. For instance:

- Make a mistake and they throw you under the bus.
- Share confidential information and they leak it.
- Send out memos you haven't vetted.
- Schedule or cancel interviews and other events without telling you.
- Show up at meetings or interviews they were not invited to.
- Speak on your behalf without your knowledge.
- Agree with you in private and disagree in public.

Where does this list come from? My own experience. I've had enough negative experiences with underlings on the make that I've come to dread them. Even though some have turned out positive, they are at the very least a time-consuming distraction from the work I've been hired to do.

Here's an example from recent experience: A young man new to the process improvement field is attached to our consulting team, his role being to help arrange for data-gathering interviews, to generally help us get our bearings, and to learn from us.

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This guy is a classic sycophant, lavishing praise on us and listening eagerly to our shop talk at coffee breaks. He does seem to know everybody in the company and accomplishes things quickly. The first note of dissonance is when he says he would welcome our advice in creating process maps, which he is just learning how to do, and then rejects the few modest suggestions we make. Next he shows up at interviews (which are supposed to be confidential), introduces himself at length and wants to sit in. I politely kick him out, but my comrades allow him to stay. Finally, he arranges a conference call with a key individual and then dominates the conversation, doing not just the introductions but asking all the questions and making all the points on our side. I become convinced this guy is filled with malice, jealous of our status as consultants and frustrated with his own stalled career, which is why he's trying so hard to piggyback on our presence in order to elevate his visibility to senior leaders.

What are your options for managing such situations? You can grin and bear it. You can establish rules about how you must operate (such as treating interviews as private). You can use the same rude tactics listed above, such as not telling the person the schedule or making changes without informing him. Or you can confront him and his behavior, which is what I did after the conference call ended. It cost me the client relationship, because our "friend" immediately went to his boss and complained about me, as I figured he would. And it damaged my relationship with my own team members, who recoiled at such direct conflict. They saw *me* as the jerk. But I had made my choice, and I was okay with the consequences.

Summary

So what can you do about the jerks you will surely encounter at work? My personal lessons learned are:

Assume command of those things that are vitally important if you are to succeed. In the examples above, those things included who should make decisions about course content; who is in charge of the schedule; what are the rules about interviewing. The details will be different for every situation, but there are always some things over which you should never cede control.

Learn from negative experiences. Even though you may wish at the time you were not trapped in a bad situation, there is much to learn, maybe more than what you can gain from positive experiences. Dealing with my bullying Director at the bank gave me an arsenal of counteracting tactics for outwitting her. I wouldn't have learned such things from a positive, nurturing boss.

The more you can deal with jerks and jerk behavior in public, the more effective you're likely to be. Somebody bullies, lies, threatens or otherwise treats you wrong in private, don't deal with that person in private anymore if at all possible. If you're going to confront, do it in public.

Make conscious choices about what circumstances you will and won't accept. I will not accept an underling attached to me again, ever. However, there are plenty of other things I will tolerate that other consultants might not. For example, teaming with other consultants has been a mixed bag for me, sometimes being a highly fruitful experience and other times a hell of manipulation and conflict, but I'm okay with trying to make such arrangements work. Some of my colleagues would not, and that's their choice. Do know what your choices are.

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Oh, and as they say, have fun.

Author

Alan Ramias is a Partner of the Performance Design Lab (PDL). He has had twenty-five years of experience in performance improvement and organization effectiveness. Alan was employed by Motorola for ten years as an internal consultant on organizational performance. As a member of the team that founded Motorola University, he was the first person to introduce Geary Rummler's pioneering concepts in process improvement and management to business units within Motorola. Alan advocated and led several of the first groundbreaking projects in process improvement that evolved to the invention of six sigma and Motorola's winning of the first Malcolm Baldrige Award in 1988. Alan was also involved in major restructuring projects at Motorola, and in job design work, compensation planning, workplace literacy, and educational program development. After joining The Rummler-Brache Group in 1991, Alan led major successful performance improvement engagements within Fortune 500 companies. His experience spanned several industries and the full spectrum of corporate functions and processes, such as strategic planning, manufacturing, product development, financial management, and supply chain. Major clients included Shell, Hewlett-Packard, 3M, Citibank, Motorola, Steelcase, Citgo, Hermann Miller, Louisiana-Pacific, and Bank One. After leading many high-profile projects, he became a partner and Managing Director of Consulting Services at RBG. He led development of much of RBG's products and services, and was responsible for selecting, training and mentoring RBG's consultant teams. Upon leaving RBG, Alan founded his own consulting company, where he continued to practice in the field of performance consulting. He was also involved in several organizational restructuring initiatives in the U.S. and in Asia. Alan can be reached at aramias@ThePDLab.com.

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