

Getting Naked - Client Service Redefined

By Patrick Lencioni



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When I graduated from college and became a management consultant, one of the first things I was taught was how to answer questions from clients without giving away my age or lack of business experience. This is part of the “never let them see you sweat mentality” that many of us have learned in business.

As young consultants, the new recruits were taught how to research and present ideas to clients as if we had all the answers. We were taught to demonstrate authority and portray ourselves as smart—even slightly superior to clients at all times. Many of my colleagues, including me, hated our jobs. And to be fair, it didn’t feel like our clients liked us much either. But that was the world of consulting, and unfortunately, in many places, this approach to client service still exists.

When I left that job and joined a “real” company, I became a client myself, bringing in consultants to do work for my organization. During that time, I developed my current approach to consulting which we’ve been using in my firm for the past dozen years. We call it ‘naked consulting’ and it has yielded more client loyalty than we could have ever imagined

The Approach

At its core, naked service boils down to the ability of a service provider to be vulnerable, to embrace uncommon levels of humility, selflessness and transparency for the good of a client. Most of us live our lives trying to avoid awkward and painful situations, which is why it is no surprise that we are all susceptible to the three fears that sabotage client loyalty which include:

Fear of Losing the Business – Worrying about losing a client’s business may cause service providers and consultants to avoid the very things that ultimately engender trust and loyalty.

Fear of Being Embarrassed – Rooted in pride, this fear can lead service providers to withhold their best ideas from clients.

Fear of Feeling Inferior – To avoid feeling irrelevant or being overlooked, consultants try to achieve and preserve a high level of importance in clients’ minds.

We find that clients are more interested in candor, modesty, and transparency than they are in confidence, authority, and perfection. That’s not to say that competence is irrelevant; clients need to know that we have the knowledge and experience to help them. But once we’ve reached that level, the best way to differentiate ourselves from competition—not to mention help a client implement the ideas we’re recommending to them—is to be vulnerable with them.

Vulnerability is the opposite of, well, invulnerability. It’s about honesty and authenticity. It is only by facing and overcoming those fears, and getting comfortable being naked, that we can earn the kind of trust that creates loyalty with clients.

The Naked Service Provider

What does being naked look like in practice? Naked service providers and consultants confront clients (kindly) with difficult information and perspectives, even if the client might not like hearing it. Naked consultants ask potentially dumb questions, and make potentially dumb

suggestions, because if those questions or suggestions ultimately help their client, it is worth the potential embarrassment. They also admit their weaknesses and celebrate their mistakes. Even before landing a client, a naked consultant will demonstrate vulnerability and take risks. They will give away their best ideas and start consulting to the prospective client during a sales call. In fact, they'll do no real selling at all, foregoing that activity in order to find a way to help a client even if they never actually become one.

The Rewards

If all this sounds a little counterintuitive, even crazy, that's because it is, at least to many consultants and service providers. But the rewards are significant. Service providers that practice the naked approach will find it easier to retain clients through greater trust and loyalty. It also allows firms to be more open, more generous and less desperate in the sales process which is the differentiator from more traditional sales approaches.

Even beyond the world of clients, being naked has its benefits and advantages. When we can be vulnerable with the people we live and work with on a daily basis, we build stronger relationships, demonstrate our trust in them, and inspire them to improve by being vulnerable themselves. And that is certainly worth getting naked for.

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Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

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