



## GUEST ESSAYS

### **Client Satisfaction: You Need to Know What It Takes to Satisfy Them Before You Can Do It Well**

Kevin J Cooley, P.E.

#### ***"You just can't please some clients"... myth or reality?***

Ever hear a project manager say, "We did everything on this project we were supposed to do according to our contract and more, but, that client is still unhappy... I guess we simply can't please him"? Do you think that's really so? Maybe it is. Some clients place unreasonable expectations and demands on their consultants. Unfortunately, client dissatisfaction is often symptomatic of an organizational weakness or "blind spot" that can and should be fixed. What's particularly troubling about this project manager's statement is that it reveals a false perception about what's needed to satisfy clients. In reality, client satisfaction typically requires more than simply performing the obligations that are spelled out in the contract.

#### **Public Enemy No. 1 – IGNORANCE!**

About the only good news reflected in this project manager's statement is that he apparently knows his client is unhappy. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. While some clients are very demonstrative in letting you know when they are unhappy, many others are conflict avoidant. They don't like to deliver critical feedback (bad news) to their consultants. Many prefer to complain to their friends, family, associates and, too frequently, to your competitors and potential clients. You don't hear about it, but, it can undermine your business. There's usually more than a single project or client relationship on the line when clients are dissatisfied.

#### **Problems vs. Opportunities (for Improvement)**

It's important to distinguish between problems and opportunities. There is almost always an opportunity to solve a problem but a problem is not a prerequisite to an opportunity. Just as client dissatisfaction can threaten a firm's future success, opportunities for achieving greater client satisfaction can also be a threat. Here's a real-life case-in-point:

During a client satisfaction interview with an a/e firm's top developer client, the client's director of development services (who hired and managed all outside planning and design consultants) graded the a/e firm as a "6" on a scale of 1 to 10 for meeting the client's needs and expectations. The firm was surprised and maybe even shocked to receive such a low grade since the firm believed they had provided "premier client" service. Moreover, based on their strong performance over the preceding year, this firm had become the developer's lead consultant, performing most of their major projects.

When asked to explain the disappointing grade, the client confided his overall disappointment with all a/e consultants. He assured the interviewer that this firm was "the best so far and far better than their predecessors who were probably a 2 or 3 on his evaluation scale".

When pressed to identify what it would take for a consultant to get a 9 or 10 on his grading scale, the client confided that the main area for improvement (opportunity) was related to the consultant having a



## GUEST ESSAYS

better understanding of the his development business and the downstream process for moving his projects from the design stage to completion.

Apparently, this client was looking for a project manager to be a partner with whom to commiserate, brainstorm and rely upon to be responsive to his everyday job demands and pressures. Certainly, he was looking for more than a good civil engineer to deliver high quality plans & specifications and get his permits.

Are this client's needs and expectations unreasonable or impossible for his a/e consultants to meet? Do you think that what this client wanted (in addition to high-quality plans & specs and permits) was written down in the contract scope of work? The answer to both of these questions is clearly no. Then how in the world is the a/e firm supposed to know this?

It is possible that the client told this project manager exactly what he needed and expected from him. If so, this project manager either did not hear it or he and his firm had not yet effectively responded to it. What is more likely, and in fact was the case here, is that the client did not clearly communicate his needs and expectations to this project manager or any of his competitor-counterparts who had likewise disappointed him over the years. If the client satisfaction interview hadn't occurred, his unmet needs and expectations might still be his secret.

### **Opportunity or Threat... (or BOTH)!**

In a debriefing workshop with the project manager and several other key members of the consultant's team the client satisfaction interviewer delivered both the *good news* and the *bad news* as follows:

*"First the good news... this client says we are doing good work. He says we are the best consultants with whom he's ever worked. He plans to keep using us to do his major projects and he expects us to continue providing him with high quality plans and specs."*

*Now, the bad news... we are very vulnerable in this client relationship. Just as we have won work from our competitors by convincing and showing this client that we are better, there is a great opportunity for some other consultant to displace us by convincing this client and then showing him that they know the development business much better than us and can deliver high quality civil engineering plans and specs like we do.*

*We have a golden opportunity now (with this knowledge) to solidify our position as this client's "prime consultant" by responding to his other "unmet" needs and expectations... before someone else finds out about them and acts on it."*

How many similar threat/opportunities might exist with your firm's key clients and potential new clients; most firms have many.

### **Doing Something About It... Taking Action.**

Knowing about a problem or opportunity is one thing; acting on it is quite another. In this case-in-point story, the firm connected the client's development services director with their semi-retired, past-president who was living reasonably nearby the client's headquarters. This "old salt" was still working on a



## GUEST ESSAYS

consulting basis to perform special assignments for the firm and had been a developer himself years ago. He quickly became a confidant to the development services director and a mentor to the a/e firm's project manager to teach him about the inside of the development business.

This added component of client service boosted the firm's client satisfaction rating into the virtually untouchable range of 9-10 for meeting needs and expectations. The experience raised awareness throughout the a/e firm about the importance of having project managers who understand the client's business as well as their own.

### **A Systemic Approach to Client Satisfaction...**

Looking back on the a/e firm's success story, there were a series of inter-related steps that happened sequentially to produce a positive outcome... a PROCESS. Wouldn't it be great if this scenario were routine rather than a random occurrence for this firm and yours?

Firms who want to do something about improving client service/satisfaction can and should take a similar systemic approach to learn about and respond to their clients' needs and expectations. For lack of a standard industry term, let's call this process a Client Satisfaction Improvement Program (CSIP). Here's the key components that a CSIP should have:

- A continuous outreach program to solicit and compile direct, candid, and relevant client satisfaction feedback.
- A procedure to properly evaluate the feedback and determine what actions are needed to appropriately respond to it.
- A program to monitor the progress of response actions and to alert top management when these actions are not being undertaken in a timely manner.
- Commitment by top management to allocate the necessary resources to operate the CSIP and their follow-up response when CSIP response actions are not being properly carried out.

### **One Last Word...**

It's important to remember however that when developing a CSIP:

***You need to know what it takes to satisfy your clients before you can do it well... take time to ask them, listen and understand their answer and act on it!***

---

*Kevin J. Cooley, P.E. is a founder/principal of PBO Solutions which offers advisory and management support services to project-based organizations in areas of strategic and business planning, organizational restructuring, project and operations management, mergers & acquisitions, quality systems and training and effective communications. He can be reached at: 407-788-6050.*

---



## GUEST ESSAYS

*NOTE: This article is intended for general discussion of the subject, and should not be mistaken for legal advice. Readers are cautioned to consult appropriate advisors for advice applicable to their individual circumstances.*