

A client is a client is a client.

Not so.

by

John Philip Bachner*

“I’m having lunch with a client.” That’s not true and you need to understand why. It matters.

A client is almost invariably an entity: a corporation, a jurisdiction, an institution of some sort. The person with whom you’ll be dining is not the client, but rather a representative of the client. So what does that matter? It matters in the sense that you need to remind yourself about where the client representative fits into the client organization, and how the individual’s role within the organization affects you.

Let’s say, for the sake of discussion, that the client representative with whom you deal is fairly low in the pecking order. The individual asks, “So when will your report be ready?”

It’s important for the client representative to know that, because your report has to be on hand for the next step to commence, and the next step will be in the hands of the client representative’s boss. The boss, in turn, knows about how long it will take her to implement her package of responsibilities, so she can let her boss know about when he’ll have to start getting his portion of the assignment going, which will give his boss a good feel for when the project will be in “high gear.”

So, when will the report be ready? “In eight to ten weeks,” you say, knowing full well that the client representative hears eight and you mean ten, but only if everything goes smoothly, which is unlikely.

Why not just tell the truth up front? “I don’t want to disappoint the client,” is a response I sometimes hear, and I don’t know how true that really is. But I’m not about to contest it, especially because I don’t have to: No matter why geotechnical engineers do it (and they’re not alone in this), they shouldn’t. It’s a sure way to lose client representatives and, of course, clients. It can also make people sore enough to become upset – and litigious – over even the smallest problem.

When you deliver your report in, say, 11 weeks, your client representative will already have gone to his boss to tell him the bad news, forcing his boss to tell her boss, and so on up the food chain, until there’s a whale of a lot of frustration and anger at the top. If the client consisted of just one person, maybe it wouldn’t matter that much. But the client consists of many people, and any number of them want to please those above them. In fact, the most important responsibility most project managers need to fulfill is to make the client representatives they deal with heroic in their respective client organizations. You can do that by referring to client representatives as who they really are: client representatives. Every time you force yourself to say “client representative” instead of “client” – doing it is awkward at first – you remind your self that you have a duty to your client representatives, to help them succeed in their organizations. That may just be enough to inspire you to engage in expectations management, a technique every good automobile mechanic knows inside and out. By allowing yourself enough time, you can almost always deliver on or ahead of schedule. And by quoting appropriate fees and expenses, you can almost always deliver on or below budget. Doing that makes your client representative heroic, which makes you a hero to your client representative...putting you well on your way to helping your firm develop a client for life.

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