Five Ways to Build Strong Client Relationships from Day One

If your practice involves a high level of daily client contact, your client relations skill set is critical.

You have a well-laid plan on Monday morning when you arrive at the office. You have a couple of meetings, discovery review and a pleading that needs a client's final approval. By 9:30 a.m., however, you have taken two calls from clients about "emergencies." By 1 p.m., one of those early calls has turned into an actual emergency, you still need to get the pleading to the client, and you can forget about the discovery review. Your plan for the day is out the window.

If you are an attorney who has a high level of daily client contact, days like this are common. To keep cases and clients from blowing up, your client relations skills are as important as your courtroom and negotiation skills.

Relationship-Building Begins the First Time You Meet a Client

In the first meeting, you set the stage for how you intend to interact with the client, how the relationship will grow, and what the client can expect from you. And that's especially useful when client emergencies erupt. Here are five ways you can build a strong relationship, starting with that initial meeting.

Five Tips for Better Client Relationships

1. Exercise your listening skills by asking open-ended questions. When you have a client who needs to vent or tell you their story, let them. It is critical to show that you are listening and care about what they have to say. This may seem basic, but seasoned attorneys who have heard thousands of client stories may immediately jump to conclusions and seem unintentionally dismissive of what a client is saying.

Active listening is not easy but it can establish trust and provide clues into the client's mindset. If you have an emotional client, keep them focused by asking open-ended questions such as:

- "How did that happen?"

- “What did you do after … ?”
- “Why is that important to you?”
- “How did that make you feel?”

If you need to get a client back on track, you can say something like, “Let’s go back to ____. I want to know more about that.” This does two things: It tells the client you are listening and cues them into what you think is important.

2. Define the best method of communication for the client. This can be as simple as asking how they want to communicate with you. Email, often preferable for attorneys, is not the best way to reach everyone. It is important to know how your client best responds to certain communications so neither of you get frustrated.

3. Know when to have a face-to-face meeting. Technology is wonderful, but in certain situations, there is no substitute for a face-to-face meeting. An example is a client agreeing to accept an adverse settlement position. Have an in-person meeting at your office (or a video call) so you can assess their body language, intent and comprehension of the settlement.

- Do they fully understand the terms?
- What is their reason for wanting to accept it?
- Do they seem comfortable in accepting the terms?

You might also want a face-to-face meeting when a client does an abrupt about-face on their position or accuses you of failing to work fast enough. You need to assess whether this is the typical situation where the client is frustrated with the other side, or if you have an issue in the relationship.

4. Ask for payment of services without jeopardizing the relationship. The most important step you can take to make sure you get paid is to establish your expectation of timely payment from the beginning. Bill regularly and in timely fashion. Develop a system to request payment on the bill whether the amount due is $500 or $50,000. This way, even when you have an extremely large month of billings, you have laid the groundwork for asking to receive prompt payment.

5. Make the small things count. This is a basic tenet: Show your client you are interested and you care. For example, take the extra step to ensure they know how to get to the courtroom. If you practice in a bigger city and your client has to pass through security, let them know ahead of time. (Not everyone is in and out of large office buildings all the time.) Also, if someone tells you about a milestone event in their life, the next time you talk to them, ask about it. Treat them like you would want your family members to be treated.

By Michelle Lawless