

*The Fluent Blade  
Cuts Cleanly*

# Tao of the Zentropist

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF BLACK ROCK CONSULTING



*“Since we need to play the hand we’re dealt and economic realities dictate that we cannot always be as selective in choosing our ideal customer or client in lean times as we can when the economy is flush, if you want to stay in business, it is vitally important to learn how to counteract or mitigate problematic client behavior.”*

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## Client Management

### *How to Prevent Things from Getting Out of Hand*

If you’ve been in business for any length of time, chances are that you’ve encountered the “difficult” client. While this entity can take many forms, it ultimately can test a service provider’s patience, interpersonal skills and even the financial vitality of your business.

Since we need to play the hand we’re dealt and economic realities dictate that we cannot always be as selective in choosing our ideal customer or client in lean times as we can when the economy is flush, if you want to stay in business, it is vitally important to learn how to counteract or mitigate problematic client behavior.

### **Ten Tips for Difficult Clients**

So how exactly can one work with clients that are uncooperative, suspicious, reluctant to pay in a timely fashion for services rendered or otherwise reluctant to invest in the partnership necessary for the best outcome? The following suggestions may go a long way to break down barriers and establish some modicum of trust, or will otherwise help you make necessary decisions without allowing emotions to carry the day.

**Set expectations early (and often).** Always be forthright and honest as to what resources, effort and energy you intend to put forth to honor your obligations. Make no misrepresentations simply to land a sale.

**Define your deliverables.** Be very clear as to what products and/or services you are delivering. Leave no room for misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Make sure that the value of the exchange is commensurate with the price tag.

**Clear communication trumps the “head in the sand” syndrome.** Projects often begin to go sideways when the parties involved fail to engage in open and constructive dialogue. Regardless of whether the news is good or bad, you need to talk to the client and view obstacles as simply problems in search of solutions. As a service provider, it is critical that you provide regular updates in writing and follow up accordingly.

**Report progress and impediments equally.** This is a corollary to the point directly above. While it’s natural to want to celebrate success and minimize setbacks or failure, you cannot proactively find workarounds to obstacles if you fail to acknowledge them in a timely manner.

**Tie payments to progress milestones and/or hard dates.** Nobody in the “for profit” world is in business to lose



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*“Active listening can help you gain valuable insight into a client’s past experiences, insecurities or other concerns, and may provide the leverage necessary to better relate to their needs, which may otherwise go unstated.”*

**Black Rock**  
c o n s u l t i n g

11901 Santa Monica Blvd.

Unit #390

Los Angeles, CA 90025

310.598.6161

money or simply break even, and in return for your product or service, there is a good faith or contractual expectation that you will be paid for your efforts. However, for a variety of reasons clients can be slow to pay or will abuse a payment schedule that does not explicitly have the cash flow remain on par with what they are receiving in return. Make sure that if you encounter delays, especially those not of your making, you don’t find yourself scrambling to cover expenses.

***Put yourself in the client’s shoes.*** Empathy goes a long way in both personal and business relationships. Do your best to understand where the client is coming from psychologically to better predict and react to their behavior.

***Sometimes listening wins converts.*** It can do wonders if you actually take the time to hear the other party out without interruption or judgment. Active listening can help you gain valuable insight into a client’s past experiences, insecurities or other concerns, and may provide the leverage necessary to better relate to their needs, which may otherwise go unstated.

***The customer is always right – until they are not.*** There are times when a client feels entitled to things that were never part of your agreement to begin with. That’s human nature, and forgivable up to a point. In the spirit of goodwill and cooperation, you may want to go “above and beyond” to provide value and engender a positive experience. But sometimes there’s no satisfying the

client, and you must be willing to draw the line.

***Know where “the Line” is – and have a plan if crossed.*** Expanding upon our prior point, make sure that the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior is clear, and stand up for yourself to protect your vital interests.

***Know when to walk away – and when to run.*** Just like Kenny Rogers implied, you must have an exit strategy for situations where continued interaction will be detrimental to one or both parties. This is best handled contractually and not ad hoc.

These ideas are expanded upon in our corresponding online blog entry which was posted 22 September 2009.

## Summary

While we all hope to have long, financially lucrative and rewarding careers that avoid the necessity of interacting with troublesome personalities, it’s best to be prepared for the latter, especially in pursuit of the former. Understanding what makes a client difficult, and how to manage them is an art in of itself, and one worth mastering in the course of business.

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