

Creating Partnerships with Customers

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After more than three decades of hard work we have learned that building partnership with clients on three core components. These are:

1. Access-The willingness of customers to provide you with face to face interaction and time to discuss business challenges, opportunities and initiatives.
2. Credibility/Legitimacy-The confidence customers have in your capabilities and expertise to deliver results to the organization.
3. Trust-The assurance customers have in your reliability to achieve results in support of the organization's strategy, initiatives, projects, products and services.

Access consists of two factors:

1. Determining the specific decision-making power of leaders and the organizational needs by which a partnership can be structured.
2. The willingness of these key individuals to provide you with face to face time as needed to establish meaningful agreements.

Sustained customers are organizations and leaders with whom partnerships are formed and maintained independent of any project you may be working on. Communication with sustained customers is continuous and ongoing.

It is important NOT TO CONFUSE CONTACT WITH A CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP. A contact is the organization and the individual whose phone and e-mail you have for proposing your services. This organization or person may or may not be a true customer.

A true customer is one with which you have a long-term-standing relationship; who has accountability for achieving organizational results; and have authority and power to make things happen, including obtaining resources required for projects.

The optimal technique for gaining access to potential customers is to be proactive. This means that you are taking actions to gain contact and build relationship with the individuals who will, most likely, be good customers for the future. Some of the access techniques are the following:

1. Ask key people for time to discuss the business goals and the challenges their market, industry and organizations are facing.
2. Share the wins you had when engaging in other turnaround projects. (Present only performance standard results, but never the specific customer experience, unless authorize to do so).
3. Be alert to information and needs from various parts of the customer's organization.
4. Send articles you have researched and published that focus on items of importance to the customer. Follow up with an offer to discuss or train about the issue.
5. Ask to attend to the customer's staff meeting and offer support.
6. Leverage current relationships with other leaders and managers within the organization.

There is an old saying, which we fully share, and it is that **CREDIBILITY AND TRUST ARE GAINED THE OLD FASHIONED WAY: YOU EARN THEM.** These are not entitlements inherited or inherent to any organization. These assets are earned with hard work and lots of extra-miles. They are earned over time in an iterative manner through a collective set of behaviors and practices. **WARNING:** Credibility and trust can be lost in the same iterative manner. . A pattern of none-conformance behaviors will result in such loss. Once these resources are lost they are most difficult to retain.

Credibility and/or legitimacy is related to two main areas: (1) Deep professional knowledge. (2) Sustained expertise-research-innovation to be deliver.

Building credibility and/or legitimacy is also dependent on your capability to assure results. Trust focus on how you achieve those results. It is about accepting accountability when there are problems? It is about extraordinary warranties for working on commitments?

The behaviors that build trust with the customers are the following:

1. Ensure your words and actions are congruent.
2. Act in ways that really support the values and culture of your organization.
3. When having difficult with a customer, address him/her quickly and directly.
4. Be a sounding board on sensitive issues and demonstrate strong listening desire.
5. Share your own well-educated opinions, even if they are different from the majority. An expert is never a yes person!
6. Keep your focus on the big picture and shared goals and, help elevate discussions to such a level.
7. Accept accountability for our own actions and the results of those actions.
8. Avoid blaming others; instead focus on what can be done to fix the situation.

Creating sustained partnerships with customers is something highly effective experts make happen; they don't just let it happen!

Relationships never stand still!