Sightings

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INSIGHTS…IN SIGHT

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"People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care."

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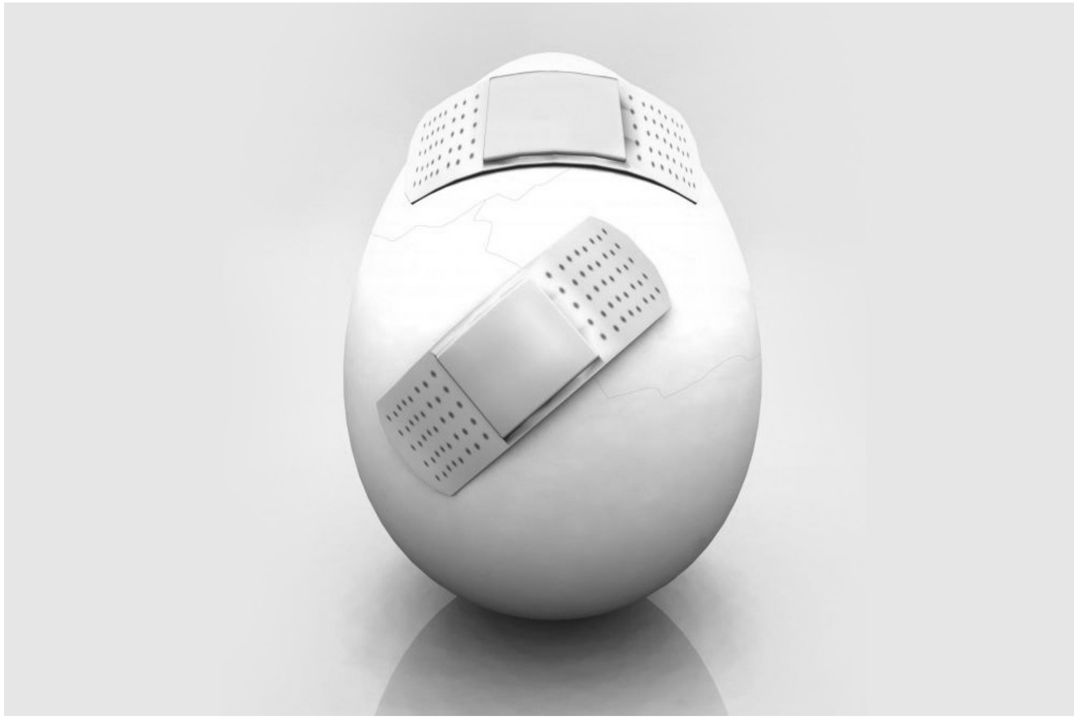

When trust is breached – how to mend the relationship

by Dennis Schrag

It is bound to happen. In every trust-based business engagement, there will be a time when the client feels dissatisfied. They may be disappointed with the project progress. They may disagree on the problem solving approach employed by the professional service provider. They may be troubled over the lack of communications. Client tension is a natural part of every engagement. But it needs to be dissipated and diffused early. Restoring common ground back to the client service-provider relationship is important. It is not easy, but it is not impossible.

There is a well-known formula for fixing disruptions in the client-relationship process. The process pivots on a win-win direction. Agreeing on a mutually beneficial orientation won the work. Mending a broken trust uses many of the same concepts. In fact, the process described below is a classic example of selling the client after the project has been awarded to your organization.

L-S-C-P-A. When relationship anxiety develops, when the client expresses a violation

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of trust, fix the situation quickly. The situation is delicate. Remember, it is not personal; it is a business relationship. The professional service provider must be attentive, empathetic and focused on the client.

Listen: Ask the client sincere, open-ended questions about their feelings towards the project progress. Listen carefully. Employ all your best active listening techniques. Lean in towards the speaker and sustain eye contact. Connect on the verbal and non-verbal messages. Nothing builds trust like active listening.

Share: Clarify. Paraphrase back to the client what you heard. In your own words, repeat back the verbal and non-verbal messages just delivered. Until you "play back" the message, the client will be uncertain you understand their perspective. Stay calm and unemotional. Your task at this stage is to confirm that you understand and empathize. Speak slowly. Provide plenty of eye contact.

Clarify: Ask fact-based questions to dig deeper into the client's perspective. Probe on word meanings, specific data points, client assumptions and beliefs. This is still a *discovery* process, so stay focused and unemotional. "Tell me more about your feelings on…" Joe Friday on *Dragnet* often repeated the phrase, "just the facts." Your task is to collect facts and client-based emotions. Go slow. The client must know you REALLY understand them.

Present: Offer one or more solutions to the client's issues. It may be necessary to offer several alternatives. Work with the client to devise an agreeable resolution to each concern. This step may take time. It may not be easy. "How should we fix this to make you feel better?" may be a question you pose when you have exhausted your creative problem solving alternatives.

Action: Propose an agenda with a reasonable level of specifics. If possible, work with the client to develop the action items. Seek agreement on a schedule. The operative issue in this phase is keeping the client engaged in the fix.

Conflicts are a natural part of every relationship. Tensions after the sale – including some buyer remorse – is a normal behavior. Expect it. Fixing a trust issue is never easy. But winning the mind and the heart of each client after the sale greatly increases the chances of repeat engagements. The L-S-C-P-A process is NOT easy.

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