

M1 Risky business and heart-breaking business

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Two detailed narratives and reflections (as described in the audio).

(1) The client / partner situation which threatened your business in some significant way...

(2) The client / partner you couldn't help to break through no matter how much you tried nor how much you cared...

An experience of risky business...

Trigger warning: suicide reference

I knew from the 'start up' zoom that something was wrong. The 'sales' process was with a colleague who I trust about as far as I can throw, and, well, at 6'6" and a former Olympian, nobody would fancy my chances. I felt that we'd flirted our way to this client, and while the content was incredibly worthwhile and exactly in my wheelhouse, I'd been persuaded to shave our costs down against my better judgement.

The meeting started simply, but we hadn't got all our introductions done when someone from the client side started to raise objections. These were really objections about a project that had already been commissioned, but it was still pretty uncomfortable. Over the next few months, it turned out that this individual was in fact another consultant with a rolling contract with the client. It became clear that everything about our team, and me especially was deeply irritating to her. When we communicated, it was too much, but if we didn't say what we were doing all the time, there was open hostility in emails and meetings.

My own emotional reactions following our interactions was a surprise to me - my default is to try to work out what's going on with the other person, and through a few meetings, I managed to find out more of her concerns behind the scenes - she was hugely preoccupied with her family and her teenagers' experiences of the pandemic and their schooling, and I started to notice that there was a lot of combative language in how she talked about every area of her life - she was 'fighting' the school board and 'battling' with her son's teacher.

We progressed through the project and I largely handled the communication without having my team further upset unnecessarily, but just after the Christmas break we were supposed to have a run-through meeting that I had to cancel at the last minute. The cancellation was unexpected and unavoidable, and with hindsight, one of the most stressful moments of my career - another colleague had been sectioned after a pretty serious suicide attempt and I was pulled into a non-negotiable internal meeting. Of course, my emailed apology wasn't enough for the client, and they complained about me. The complaint went to people who didn't know about the other situation, and rather than trust that there was something pretty serious going on, I wasn't supported.

The project came to an end and the client was happy with the output - but they didn't attribute any of their satisfaction with my management or input. We had to bring in our 'expert team' of workshop facilitators, and my colleague added a few additional deliverables that were outside our initial contract that meant we went seriously over budget.

My overriding feeling was that I was let down by my colleagues and my reputation internally was damaged despite there being multiple internal challenges with sickness and pandemic-related absences. I was deeply frustrated and conflicted about holding back about the overall situation - the relationship with the non-client-consultant had scarred me so much that I didn't want to address it or revisit it later. There was one silver lining - in our project 'review' meeting, the initial salesperson once again highlighted how close the project was to being a disaster - admitted that there was some deeply unprofessional behaviour on the part of the client, but also strongly hinted that I was to blame. Rather than being rounded on by the project team, they independently got in touch with me to thank me for being a buffer and protecting them from the challenges, and 3 of the project team said the project was one of their most enjoyable.

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The client who broke my heart...

When I was a lecturer, I did many guest slots on other courses within the faculty. While most of my teaching was for graduate students on MSc and PhD programmes, I usually tried to get to know the undergraduates (especially to encourage them to go on with their studies). On one such occasion, I met a first year undergrad, a mature student, who was LIVID with the state of the course and had no hesitation in telling me exactly what she thought.

She wanted to be admitted onto the masters programme without completing the undergrad course and somehow she managed to negotiate this with the dean of the faculty (he was later removed from his position as he'd stolen £80k from the university... but not prosecuted because the university hired him knowing that he had a previous conviction for art theft - but that's a different story).

So we were left the conditions that she would reach at least 85% in all her assignments to be considered - that I would look at each assignment and have the final say into if she could come into the MSc.

Each time I met her, she challenged everything about the course, the university, her classmates and was contentious about everything. Her arguments were strong, but she was also very clear that her expectations were extremely low based on her experiences to date, and that she would be talking to whoever would listen about the poor management of everything. By this point, my colleagues had started to hide from her - everyone from PhD student assistants to the head of the department. My teaching load was quite high at that point, so I was on campus a lot and became the default point of contact. Each interaction left me feeling like I was making things worse - talking more was opening us to more potential issues.

But... somehow, the time spent, the willingness both to engage her and also visibly be available for other students (boundaries and equity were being modelled carefully) seemed to flip something - and she started to relax a little. We explored some of her insecurities, and the relationship grew as she did (inevitably) start on the MSc programme. She actually was very honest - she was as willing to report good things as she saw them as well as the poor practice. She was the last cohort I taught before I left the job, and she requested that we keep in touch. We have, and she's now a really good friend... we're even having lunch this week.

And the lesson? I think this was all about patience - and engagement. In the kind of counselling that I was trained in (motivational interviewing, if you're interested!) we think that it takes 20% of any encounter just to be involved in rapport-building and engagement - and that it's harder to focus or start any behaviour change without this engagement. This was the best demonstration I have had about that engagement -

being patient with the long process.

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Anything else...