



Client Service, not [Client Servility](#)

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Most client-serving organizations I know make a pretty big deal about client service. For consulting, law, HR, IT, accounting, software, and salespeople in complex businesses—client service is right at the top of their list of virtues. And rightly so. But—sometimes, things can get a little twisted.

What do you make of:

- The administrative assistant who picks up the Officer's laundered shirts and delivers them to him at the airport at 9PM. Regularly.
- The project manager who hauls the whole team in on Sunday to re-work the slide deck. Regularly.
- The senior officer who drops in on the staff meeting to "send a message about how much leadership cares," but leaves early because "when the client calls, you know..." Regularly.
- The salesperson who cuts price at the drop of the hat when the client demands. Regularly.
- The VP who cancels his end-of-day wrap-up meeting with the new hire candidate on the final interview round because "I had no choice, the client changed our meeting date." Regularly.
- The manager who joins the training session late and slips out to take calls between blackberry-checks, because "we're in the middle of a really tough client issue." Regularly.



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- (The presidential candidate who, in mid-speech, stops to take a phone call from his wife on his cellphone from the podium. More than once.)

The key word is, of course, regularly. Any one of those examples can be held up as a case of client heroism. If, that is, it's an isolated event. The problems come when it's not isolated.

Great client service is doing things above and beyond.

That's when client service gets perverted into client servitude. And when we become servile, three things happen:

1. We continue to insist that we are in fact meeting the highest standards of service;
2. The client (or team, or associate) no longer respects us.
3. When respect is gone, our ability to be trusted advisors is quickly compromised.

CLIENT SERVICE IS NOT CLIENT SERVITUDE

Great client service is doing things above and beyond; behaving in unusual ways when faced with unusual situations; and doing so selflessly, for the sake of the client.

An act of client service is an act freely chosen.

In the long run, we do it because we believe in it as a way of doing business. But in the short term, in those cases where we might be better self-served by doing something else, and we still choose client service—that is true service.

Being servile is quite another thing. It means seeking out options to give faux service, so we can get credit. It means doing things not for their own sake, but for the credit it may garner us in the eyes of the client. It means getting our priorities wrong—seeing things as how we can help ourselves, not one's clients or partners.

Synonyms for servile include sycophant, brown-noser, suck-up, flatterer, lickspittle and toady. Adjectives we use to describe the servile include obsequious, smarmy, devious, slimy, flattering and fawning.

We suspect those who are servile of dishonesty—of speaking falsely in an attempt at self-aggrandizement. Their motives are therefore bad. And ironically, their servility costs them in terms of respect from the very people they are most trying to impress. We don't trust such people. And we don't respect them.

We don't respect them because they seem to have a low estimation of their own



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worth. They seem to need the approval of others to feel good about themselves. And if someone doesn't value himself highly, then they could be wrong either about their worth—or wrong in their estimation. Neither is good.

What client takes advice from someone who doesn't respect the worth of his own advice?

What client takes advice from someone who doesn't respect the worth of his own advice? What team member believes a senior who always subordinates all other value-adding activities to servility, calling it "client service?"

Clients take our advice for various reasons, but basically because they believe in our expertise, and they believe we have their best interests at heart. Being servile destroys both of those: because it is clearly self-motivated, it draws into question even our competence. After all, if our motive is client approval, might we not shade the data?

Most clients don't want servants, they want partners. They want professionals who have self-respect, who have the courage of their own convictions, who can be trusted to speak

the truth because it is the truth, not because it will get them approval.

It's not that client service is unselfish. If I'm honest, there's always a tiny touch of servility lurking around the edges of most client service I perform. It's hard to be unaware of the value of being perceived as client-serving.

The trick is to not be overcome by a need for recognition as one who serves clients. If we become slave to that recognition, then we have to that extent abandoned client service.

To be client service oriented is to do the next right thing, and to be detached from the outcome; particularly whatever benefit might accrue to me from doing the right thing.

This is the heart of it, I think. Client service is doing good for the client. We are not surprised when we get credit for doing it. But expecting good from it is Station One on the slippery slope, where the End-Station is doing it only in order to get credit for doing it.

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