

Getting Naked: Client Service Redefined

By Patrick Lencioni

When I graduated from college and became a management consultant, one of the first things I was taught was how to answer questions from clients without giving away my age or lack of business experience. This is part of the “never let them see you sweat mentality” that many of us have learned in business.

As young consultants, the new recruits were taught how to research and present ideas to clients as if we had all the answers. We were taught to demonstrate authority and portray ourselves as smart — even slightly superior to clients, at all times. Many of my colleagues, including me, hated our jobs. And to be fair, it didn't feel like our clients liked us much either. But that was the world of consulting, and unfortunately, in many places, this approach to client service still exists.

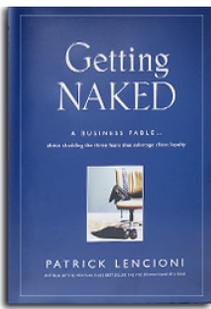
When I left that job and joined a “real” company, I became a client myself, bringing in consultants to do work for my organization. During that time, I developed my current approach to consulting which we've been using in my firm for the past dozen years. We call it ‘naked consulting’ and it has yielded more client loyalty than we could have ever imagined

The Approach

At its core, naked service boils down to the ability of a service provider to be vulnerable, to embrace uncommon levels of humility, selflessness, and transparency for the good of a client. Most of us live our lives trying to avoid awkward and painful situations, which is why it is no surprise that we are all susceptible to the three fears that sabotage client loyalty which include:

- ⊕ **FEAR OF LOSING THE BUSINESS** Worrying about losing a client's business may cause service providers and consultants to avoid the very things that ultimately engender trust and loyalty.
- ⊕ **FEAR OF BEING EMBARRASSED** Rooted in pride, this fear can lead service providers to withhold their best ideas from clients.
- ⊕ **FEAR OF FEELING INFERIOR** To avoid feeling irrelevant or being overlooked, consultants try to achieve and preserve a high level of importance in clients' minds.

We find that clients are more interested in candor, modesty, and transparency than they are in confidence, authority, and perfection. That's not to say that competence is irrelevant; clients need to know that we have the knowledge and experience to help them. But once we've reached that level, the best way to differentiate ourselves from competition - not to mention help a client implement the ideas we're recommending to them - is to be vulnerable with them.



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Vulnerability is the opposite of, well, invulnerability. It's about honesty and authenticity. It is only by facing and overcoming those fears, and getting comfortable being naked, that we can earn the kind of trust that creates loyalty with clients.

The Naked Service Provider

What does being naked look like in practice? Naked service providers and consultants confront clients (kindly) with difficult information and perspectives, even if the client might not like hearing it. Naked consultants ask potentially dumb questions, and make potentially dumb suggestions, because if those questions or suggestions ultimately help their client, it is worth the potential embarrassment. They also admit their weaknesses and celebrate their mistakes. Even before landing a client, a naked consultant will demonstrate vulnerability and take risks. They will give away their best ideas and start consulting to the prospective client during a sales call. In fact, they'll do no real selling at all, foregoing that activity in order to find a way to help a client even if they never actually become one.

The Rewards

If all this sounds a little counterintuitive, even crazy, that's because it is, at least to many consultants and service providers. But the rewards are significant. Service providers who practice the naked approach will find it easier to retain clients through greater trust and loyalty. It also allows firms to be more open, more generous, and less desperate in the sales process which is the differentiator from more traditional sales approaches.

About Patrick Lencioni

Patrick Lencioni is the author of nine business books including the new release, *Getting Naked*, and the best-seller, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. He is the founder and president of The Table Group, a management consulting firm focused on organizational health.