

Getting Naked - Q&A with Patrick Lencioni

Question: Why do you use the term 'naked' and where does it come from?

Lencioni: Naked service is a term that refers to the idea of being vulnerable with clients, being completely open and honest with no sense of pretense or cover. The concept comes from the approach that we adopted more than a decade ago to work with our clients at The Table Group. We help CEOs and their teams build healthy organizations, and we found that by being completely transparent and vulnerable with clients, we built levels of trust and loyalty that blew us away.

Question: What makes naked service different from the way most people provide service?

Lencioni: So many service providers and consultants feel the need to demonstrate that they have the right answers and that they don't make mistakes. Not only do clients see this as inauthentic, they often feel that they are being condescended to and manipulated. We've found that what clients really want is honesty and humility.

Question: What are the three fears?

Lencioni: People spend most of their 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. They include:

Fear of Losing the Business - No service provider wants to lose clients or revenue. Interestingly, it is this very notion that prevents many service providers from having the difficult conversations that actually build greater loyalty and trust. Clients want to know that their service providers are more interested in helping succeed in business than protecting their revenue source.

Fear of Being Embarrassed - This fear is rooted in pride. No one likes to publicly make mistakes, endure scrutiny or be embarrassed. Naked service providers are willing to ask questions and make suggestions even if those questions and suggestions turn out to be laughably wrong. Clients trust naked service providers because they know that they will not hold back their ideas, hide their mistakes, or edit themselves to save face.

Fear of Feeling Inferior - Similar to the previous fear, this one is rooted in ego. Fear of being inferior is not about being intellectually wrong, it is about preserving social standing with the client. Naked service providers are able to overcome the need to feel important in the eyes of their client and basically do whatever a client needs to help the client improve.

Question: Each of the three fears has a number of underlying principles required for providing naked service. Which principals are most difficult?

Lencioni: I think that some of the most difficult of the principles are two related ideas that we call "entering the danger" and "telling the kind truth". Both of these have to do with putting ourselves in a difficult situation for the benefit of a client. When we enter the danger, we are stepping right into the messiest situations—even when a client is hesitant or unwilling to do so themselves. When we tell the kind truth, we are confronting a client with news that may be difficult to hear, but is ultimately in their best interest to know. In both of these cases, there is a tendency to avoid the situations in order to protect the business. But when we are naked, we welcome these opportunities because they demonstrate that we are more concerned about helping the people who hire us, rather than protecting ourselves.

Question: Why don't all service providers do this? Are there any drawbacks to this approach?

Lencioni: On the surface, the approach may sound soft or commonplace, but actually putting it into action can be downright scary. Getting naked is not for the faint-of-heart and those who employ this approach need to be prepared for the potential costs. Naked service providers leave themselves exposed to criticism and rejection, and may lose some business. However, once they prepare themselves for those situations, they find that they actually receive less criticism and are much better able to attract and retain clients. What is more, when they do lose a potential client due to their naked approach, they have no regrets because they realize that the relationship wouldn't have been a productive one anyway.

Question: Can anybody do this?

Lencioni: Not everyone is fit to be a naked service provider. It requires levels of self-esteem, humility, and courage that not all consultants are interested in having. However, anyone who is willing to set their ego and fear aside can practice the approach successfully. And they will benefit both in terms of the success of their business as well as experiencing growth in their personal lives.

Question: How has the model affected your company?

Lencioni: Practicing the naked approach has made our firm more successful than we could have anticipated, both in terms of the financial rewards, and more importantly, the relationships that we've built with clients. It is a great feeling to visit a client and feel like a part of their family. It has made our business feel more like a vocation and less like a transactional exchange of money for services. Beyond that, nakedness has permeated our culture internally, as it always will, creating an environment of trust and openness.

Question: What is the impact of naked service on the bottom line?

Lencioni: Service firms that practice the naked approach will find it easier to retain clients through greater trust and loyalty. That is the first and most obvious benefit. But they'll also be able to attract clients better because naked service begins before a client actually becomes a client. It allows firms to be more open, more generous and less desperate in the sales process, and creates great differentiation from more traditional sales approaches. Finally, firms that practice the naked approach will attract and retain the right kind of consultants and professionals who yearn for an honest, natural way of working, both with clients and with one another.