

RAISING THE BAR:

How To Get Your Difficult Clients To Willingly Shape Up Or Ship Out!

By Kevin Lawrence, Business & Personal Success Coach

Difficult clients, you know the ones – you cringe when they call, you dread receiving their year-end files, you lose sleep thinking about sending your bill and having to deal with their backlash, and you have to fight to get paid what you're worth.

Difficult clients are a reality that every accountant is faced with. Some practitioners deal with this problem and move on to more profitable and rewarding clients. But, the reality is that most firms seem to (for some strange reason) put up with these clients and let the headaches mount year after year.

Your ability to effectively increase the quality of these clients dramatically impacts the success of your practice and your personal quality of life. As public practitioners, you have the unique power to choose who you work with and do you have to tolerate working with difficult people. Let's look at how you can achieve this.

Difficult Clients Cost You A Fortune

When you built your practice, you likely took on almost every client that came your way and eventually filled up all the hours in your days - and then some! This seemed like a great strategy, but you ended up with a practice full of some fantastic "A" quality clients and a whole bunch of low-grade headache-creators. You got stuck! This is where you began to see (and feel) how those difficult clients cost you a fortune.

Not only do difficult clients take up space that could be dedicated to more profitable and rewarding clients, they add tremendous stress to your life. This stress decreases your overall effectiveness with your more valuable clients, with your staff and, most importantly, with your family and friends.

For example, if you have a client (or clients) giving you headaches over paying what you invoice them for doing their work, then you will be more frustrated with all billing-related issues. As well, the extra time it takes to handle the billing headaches will take away from the time you have for the regular work for other clients - never mind the higher value work that would benefit your good clients and you much more. On top of that, you'll likely go home exhausted with little time, energy or patience left for your family. As you can see these difficult clients have more impact than you may initially think - definitely much more than it is worth.

***NOTE:** A certain level of fee resistance is normal and healthy for a practice. If there are never any questions about the amount of your fees, there is a good chance you are not charging enough!*

Why You Hold On To Them

You know they are costly (both financially and emotionally) and you dread dealing with them, yet you continue your relationship with these difficult clients. Why? Well, there are 3 major reasons practitioners hold onto difficult clients – here are the reasons and the associated realities of each one:

1. *Fear of Conflict*

You don't want to deal with the conflict created by firing these difficult clients.

Reality: The thought of firing a client is not a pleasant one – actually, it is darned stressful. Firing a client is a last step and, in most cases, there are many things that you can do before having to let them go. Often, these difficult clients don't realize how much of a bother that they are to you. In most cases, you don't have to fire the client at all. But, you do need to do something – read on.

2. *Fear of Wasted Effort*

You do not think it would be worth the effort to tell the clients your frustrations because nothing will change.

Reality: You may think that you are saving wasted effort by saying nothing but, in reality, you're contributing to the problem. These clients often have no idea that they are frustrating for you to work with and they could make working together easier. In many cases, if they were made aware of the changes they could make, these difficult clients would gladly shape up. But, you have to give them the benefit of the doubt in the first place and tell them how to meet your standards.

3. *Fear of Lost Revenue*

You may think that it is better to keep a bad client that pays because you may not get another one.

Reality: Keeping a difficult client weighs you down and can cost you more than the fees they pay you each year. If a client is constantly adding to your stress, that negative energy is passed onto your other clients and associates - that can be expensive. If the client is not willing to shape up to your expectations and you lose the fee, your business will improve. Yes, your business will improve. Just imagine a 50-pound weight coming off your back - it frees you up to see other great opportunities for business with new or existing clients. Getting rid of a difficult client gives you time, space (and head space) to uncover more prosperous opportunities.

What To Do With Difficult Clients

The key is to ask first, and fire later. This is a strategy that I call "Raising The Bar". The idea behind this strategy is that you have expectations of your clients - much like a high jump bar you want them to leap over. The problem is that this bar is invisible to them - they are jumping as high as they normally would! Time and time again they come to your office and you get frustrated because they fail to jump high enough to make it over your bar - and they don't even know it!

To solve the problem, you simply show them the bar is actually higher than they are currently jumping. Then, explain to them how they need to perform differently to jump over the bar at the new height - if they want to.

It is your responsibility to clearly communicate your expectations (the bar height) to your clients so they can know how to work with you. Otherwise, they are completely in the dark assuming that everything is fine.

Ideally you would set the expectations clearly when you initially take a client on - now, that's a future article.

The Most Professional Solution

"Raising The Bar" is the most professional and respectful option because you take responsibility for your role in the accountant-client relationship. You are acknowledging that it is your responsibility to communicate to the client how they can be a better client for you – they won't know how to otherwise.

The best part of this process is that the client makes the decision in the end. If they don't feel that they can or want to meet your expectations, they choose to fire themselves! You'll save yourself the stress of firing clients.

Three Choices For The Difficult Client

You can see that "Raising The Bar" is simple - just make your difficult clients aware of the expectations that they are not meeting and let them decide how they'd like to handle it. Here are 3 choices you can give them:

1. **Shape Up:** The client rises to meet your expectations and become a desirable "A" client of yours.
2. **Pay More:** The client does not meet your expectations and therefore pays a higher price to remain a client (i.e.: in cases when clients provide you with unorganized work or inaccurate files that require extra work on your behalf).
3. **Ship Out:** Client does not meet your expectations and then chooses to select another accountant.

Seven Steps To Eliminate Your Difficult Clients Today

Think of the difference it would make in your practice if you "Raised the Bar" on 10 of your least desirable clients. Here's how:

1. Make a list of your 10 least desirable clients.
2. Write how they create stress for you and the expectations they are not meeting.
3. List what they'd have to do to meet your expectations. Note: If it is impossible for them to meet your expectations for legal or ethical reasons, begin the process to disengage them.

4. Call them and book a meeting in person or by phone.
5. In your meeting tell them how they are not meeting your expectations and how they can.
6. Give them the three options to choose from (as above).
7. Let them decide!

You too have a choice. Either you choose to let your difficult clients control the quality of your practice or you choose to take control and make your work much more enjoyable.

I truly hope you choose to follow through and "Raise The Bar" on your difficult clients and create a more enjoyable and profitable practice.

Kevin Lawrence is a business coach and speaker who works with accountants and entrepreneurs to help them create their personal version of an "Ideal Business", and to achieve the balance, fulfillment and other results they desire for an "Outrageous Quality of Life."

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