

Ask Your Client These Questions

By Tim W. Hrastar



When lawyers serve clients, it's usually in the capacity of being reactive—they are responding to a request, need, or want from a client. Many times, as the expression goes, "I am always up to my ass in alligators!" If you find yourself in this mode of operation all too often, it makes it extremely difficult for you to serve your clients well. If you only end up doing what's urgent, you'll never get to the important things—that is serving your client as a true advisor, not just a vendor of legal services.

Granted, it's not always easy to think ahead of your clients when you're trying to drain the swamp and alligators are chomping at your butt! Here's what you can do to really help your clients. First, you have to get yourself in the frame of mind of thinking ahead of your clients in order to improve the relationship.

The next time you talk with your client, preferably face-to-face; ask them these six questions to really discover where your relationship with them lies.

1. **How am I doing in relation to the service I perform for you?** Use specific matters that you recently worked on for the client as a point of discussion. Probe to see how they felt the quality and timeliness of the service was; and what suggestions they may have for improvement. Ask for specific suggestions on how to improve. The more specific your questions the more specific and valuable the answers will be.
2. **How well would you say I listen when we are working together, whether in-person, or on the phone?** Do you feel I am attentive, understanding, and non-judgmental in my listening abilities? Being too judgmental in listening is not effective for real understanding. When the listener is judgmental the speaker tends to become guarded and even

defensive. How can you help someone when they are afraid to really speak-up for fear of being criticized? Try to make a habit of having the speaker ask for your opinion instead of volunteering it without being asked.

3. **Are there things I can do to learn more about your business?** The more you know about a client's business the more you'll understand how you can help them. The more you know helps you to grasp the big picture. When you are able to look at things from this perspective everything becomes clearer and more understandable. Without knowing enough about their business you can't even come up with the right questions to ask. It also has the great advantage of demonstrating that you care about them in a genuine way.
4. **Am I focusing on the things you think and feel are important?** This means focusing not just on what they want, but what you think they may need as well. Focusing in this way comes from good listening, and then acting on that information. Remember, clients may know what they want, but it's usually the advisor who asks probing and thoughtful questions to discover what they really need.
5. **How can I do a better job in servicing you and your organization?** Ask them for at least two things you can do that will help them. For example, you might think about the work process. Are there ways to streamline the work flow between you and the client? Focusing on efficiency is helpful to the client when it comes to working with you—it can also be generous to your bottom-line. As you do this, focus on the outcome, what is it that is really important? Focusing only on the process is bureaucratic and counter-



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productive.

6. **How can I make it easier to do business with me?** This may include such things as how service is delivered, responsiveness of communication with the client, management of the relationship and so on. When you work with a client you want to provide seamless service. Make it a pleasure for the client to work with you. This means doing quality work the first time around, always listening respectfully, and being responsive in all your communication.

Ask your client these six questions every few months. It will create a positive dialogue and a loyal bond with the client that delivers profitable and challenging business to your door daily.

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