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How to Create a Meaningful and Successful Client Relationship

Pay attention to the emotional impact of the planning process

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Proper planning not only requires skilled expertise in legal, tax and financial matters, but keen attention to the emotional impact of the process. The advisor must forge a meaningful and productive relationship with the client. Attorneys must be aware of an array of clients' emotional needs from the financial and personal

aspects. None of this is easy to do, in part because attorneys don't have training to address these issues

As the advisor, clients come to you because you have a skill and expertise. It's important for you to create an atmosphere and a climate in the relationship that allows you to gain the client's trust. The client must feel a sense of welcome and pick up that you empathize with him. A client must feel, above all, that you understand what he's dealing with and that you're here to help him accomplish his wishes in the best possible way. You should demonstrate how you realize estate planning is an overwhelming process, especially if there are health issues or if there's substantial wealth involved. Assure the client that you understand how difficult it may be for someone to face his own mortality, as well as to make choices about how his many wishes are exercised.

Acknowledge and Manage Client's Feelings

First and foremost, acknowledge to the client how overwhelming and threatening this may feel to them. Begin to build some rapport and trust with the client. Build a working relationship and convey with authenticity that you understand the client's position.

Sometimes, a client may feel threatened by the process and the information, not because it's complex, but because it's so tough emotionally to deal with. Another client discomfort may arise from the idea of simply spending so much money relative to his income or wealth level. It may be difficult for you to demonstrate and explain to a client how his spending will affect his future assets and financial security. Some clients may be appreciative of the forewarning. Some won't heed the advice. Some may become angry. They may feel threatened by how the information was presented. Or, it could simply be that a client is guarded and fearful. Just to face these painful issues, by definition in and of itself, is threatening.

Your skill and expertise in managing emotions amid the cold facts impact how overwhelmed or threatened the client becomes. Hopefully, you can offer solutions, but even solutions can be imposing. The steps in the process can seem daunting and difficult for you to explain and more difficult for the client to absorb. It becomes more natural for the client to move away from complex solutions, rather than to move toward it. Even though you and the client are meeting because the client is motivated to move toward planning solutions, it's nonetheless a process that can be difficult for the client to embrace. It's often "a complicated dance."

Balance Preparation vs. Cost

You need to engage the client and visit his feelings throughout the entire process. Check in regularly. Offer more detail about the issue before relating the answer to buffer shock. However, the client may worry that the time it takes for you to explain these processes in depth is costly and may be aware of each billable hour, and that worry may put him on the defensive. In such situations, it's useful to acknowledge and frame the dilemma and give the client room to decide how to go forward. It's a balance between spending the time it takes to prepare an answer for a client for an answer versus his potential discomfort with the cost of that time.

Break Down Planning Into Smaller Steps

Bridging the gap between what the client wants or what the client needs is key. If that gap is too great, then the client may not be comfortable going further and delving deeper. Create a system of steps that address client wants and needs.

For example, say a patient has serious trouble with his knee and is considering knee replacement, but he doesn't want to go through the pain and the aftercare of surgery. In response, orthopedic surgeons have developed a partial knee

replacement that reduces post-surgery pain and recovery. For some patients, this is a more acceptable treatment pathway to be considered with the surgeon. There's an estate-planning counterpart. Break the planning out into more digestible phases. Steps in the process are critical for the majority of clients, and may make it easier for professional advisors. When a client comes in, he not only needs a document prepared or planning redone, but also he may have complex personal issues. The first phase often includes gathering information and organizing the elements. Too often, people have nothing organized and can't do the rest of the planning steps without that. Then, begin with creating core documents. Once those are in place, a further phase of planning can be tackled as appropriate for the client. For a client who's feeling overwhelmed, laying out the steps can make the process less intimidating.

Collaborate

The next phase will depend on the circumstances or the priorities for the client. If there's no immediate or looming tax deadline, the tax priorities may take second seat to more pressing matters. Set the priorities and lay out the phases to be more understandable. Each aspect of estate planning has a different feel, but if you, the accountant, the financial advisor and the insurance consultant collaborate, clients will often feel different types of comfort. A team approach is optimal if the client is receptive to this approach.

Different advisors, or the client, may convey certain critical information to a trust officer or to the accountant that they don't convey to their attorney, or vice versa. So, if the entire advisory team collaborates and shares the pieces of information, the whole program becomes clearer to all, and the client ultimately benefits. Collaboration can sometimes breed territorial threatening, because of fear of client encroachment of one advisor's role by another. But an ideal collaboration will likely yield better results and help abate client apprehension.

Care Managers

Additionally, as care managers become more prominent in the lives of clients with health and aging issues, the care manager will be the new major member of the estate and financial planning team. Care managers are typically licensed social workers or nurses with advanced licensing and experience in geriatrics. Many of the large trust companies and wealth advisor firms have case management staff. These professionals serve as advocates can be an added support to the client.

Establish Trust

Be mindful of about how you have to cultivate a relationship in which the client feels comfortable with you and trusts you. Use examples from your own experience to illustrate concepts and issues. That's often very reassuring to clients. This may give clients a sense that what they're dealing with is very normal. Relate to their struggle and to the emotional pull and triggers.

Many attorneys and other estate planners don't feel as comfortable exploring the qualitative, emotional arena or may simply be trained to be very technical in their overall approach. Recently, studies are being written about how the role of the advisor has become a much more holistic role. Some advisors are just not as adept in that approach. In such a case, it can be useful to convey back to the client that his questions and issues are very valid, especially in a family matter, but you may guide him to also seek simultaneous support from a counselor to help them explore and manage the emotional implications of these decisions.

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