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**Meet the MasterMinds: Tom Stevenson on *The Relationship Advantage***

Tom Stevenson held management positions at IBM for more than twenty years, and was vice president of sales and marketing for several high-tech firms. He's now a consultant and with co-author Sam Barcus, wrote ***The Relationship Advantage: Become a Trusted Advisor and Create Clients for Life***.

MCNews talked to Stevenson about how consultants can create enduring client relationships by getting back to the basics that made firms so successful in the past.

**MCNews: How would you characterize an ideal relationship—if there is such a thing—between a client and a consultant?**

**Stevenson:** The word that comes to mind is **interdependent**. In an ideal relationship, the client and the consultant focus on working together for the mutual satisfaction of the client. The consultant transfers the necessary skills and process to the client so they can truly collaborate. By that I mean they're working together because they choose to. They could just as easily choose to work apart, but the relationship is so strong because of the focus and the value that they become interdependent.

**MCNews: So what's your view on the current state of the typical client-consultant relationship?**

**Stevenson:** The fact is that a lot of trust has been broken. The corporate and accounting scandals have tarnished consultants, bankers, and top executives alike. As a result, client relationships with consultants are not as strong as they were. They're more tenuous. Consultants have to work harder to maintain relationships (and their billing rates) because of the events of the last four or five years.

I also noticed that, toward the end of the boom in the 1990s, some consulting firms abandoned their traditional pyramid approach: Instead of matching the level of the consulting practitioner to the corresponding level in the client organization, they brought in salespeople or business development specialists to go out and close business with clients. Most of these salespeople didn't grow up in the firms and didn't have the firms' culture and values. And that's dangerous.

That's exactly the plight of the corporate sales force that I've been trying to address. So when I saw consulting firms do it, I was really surprised because consultants wrote the book on keeping those relationships intact at all levels with the client. Abandoning that has been doubly harmful because trust was damaged at the same time that relationships were being handed off to closers who were hired off the street.
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I think many of these salespeople have since been let go, and now consulting firms are trying to figure out how to get back to the relationships they had before they transitioned into the business development model. I know not all consulting firms went in that direction but I was surprised when I saw many consulting firms fall into the corporate sales trap.

MCNews: By corporate sales trap do you mean putting a salesperson between the consultant and the client?

Stevenson: That's exactly right. Think about the corporate sales model. In the technology area, for example, corporate sales force turnover is 35% to 40% a year. At that rate, it doesn't take long to turn over an entire sales force.

If relationships are based on trust that is built over time and you're delegating the relationships to salespeople, you're entrusting that function to the most junior people in the firm in terms of their longevity. That's why this approach has never worked.

As long as you keep handing relationship responsibility off to the newest people in the firm, they will continue to turn over because they can never really meet the expectations of the senior practitioners have who should be doing that job themselves.

MCNews: Is it your view that when these business development people go into client organizations instead of the partner or senior manager that clients see them as pure salespeople rather than problem solvers?

Stevenson: That hits the nail on the head. And even if they do have the inclination to be problem solvers or problem finders, they don't have the history with the firm and knowledge of its processes to do that. They can't execute.

All they can do is make an appointment and hope they can bring in someone else. And, as you know, that first appointment is critical. If you use it just to set the second appointment and you can't execute real-time in front of clients, you're perceived as wasting their time.

MCNews: If a consultant does have the ideal, interdependent relationship with a client, does that necessarily translate to loyalty from that client?

Stevenson: Well, I think attaining that relationship advantage with a client implies that you do have loyalty. But that's not a free pass. I think it was Eastern Airlines that said you have to earn your wings every day. You have to keep the focus on the relationship or it will slip away from you.

If you lose that focus or if the partner or senior manager expresses less interest or shows up less frequently, I've seen once loyal relationships fizzle. When weekly visits become monthly and then yearly visits, clients may be disappointed.

MCNews: Besides having an interdependent client relationship and delivering work as promised, what other factors drive client loyalty?

Stevenson: Presence. There's a tremendous impact when you show up at the right time and you show up consistently. Too often, once you start a project, the partner or senior manager fades into the background. You've got to deliver the work, but you've got to continue to deliver it through the lips of the people who got it started. That way, the client sees that there's consistency in the handling of the relationship and knows that person is always going to be there which leads to the promise of more work in the future.

Of course, you can't just make appointments with clients purely to develop the relationship. If you show up without a focus on a specific client issue—without a client agenda—I think the trust meter starts to run backward on you.

MCNews: Are there two or three innovative relationship strategies that you think help build client loyalty?

Stevenson: Continue to use the pyramid approach so that you keep all the different levels covered in the client's organization. And deliver on time. One other thing: I've noticed that consultants are particularly good at meeting the client on neutral ground by participating in community organizations and events.

When partners or consultants participate in the March of Dimes or work on the Olympics or chair committees for non-profits, that brings them together with clients, executives and potential clients. To me that is the best referral mechanism for consulting work. It's a strategy that corporate people don't employ and generally don't know how to employ.

MCNews: Why don't corporate salespeople do more in community activities?

Stevenson: I think they choose not to because they're not around very long. It's also because of the productivity stress on salespeople. If they're not making sales calls or sitting at their computers entering data into their sales information systems, they're perceived as being time wasters.

It seems consultants by their very nature are involved in community work all the time. In many firms, consultants are given incentives to participate in such events. The idea is to meet more people and build your own network.

If something comes from it, that's fine, but if it doesn't you've done something that's worthwhile anyway. Getting business is not the primary reason for doing it. If you say I'm going to volunteer in a specific organization because these three people work there and I want to get business from them, it often doesn't work.

MCNews: When you work with consultants or clients to help them gain the relationship advantage, what one thing do you see that needs immediate improvement?

Stevenson: I think it's the ability to truly focus on the person who needs the help. There's a lot of lip service paid to that, but it's easy to lose focus.

What's out of whack is this incredible focus on oneself and one's need to talk about how great one is and how many of these problems one has solved before. Instead, consultants should go back to the fundamentals of doing research, understanding the client you're talking to, understanding the client's customers, suppliers, and issues and probing to find out if there's mutual ground where you can meet to solve a problem.

Consultants have gotten away from that and have become a little smug. When you meet a client, if all you're doing is talking about yourself, even if the client is giving you time because you're highly recommended, that translates to arrogance. So I work with people immediately around that perception of arrogance and say look, you've got to focus on that person and you can't do it unless you invest the time to learn about her or him before you meet. And then the guiding principle once you're with the client is this: it's not what you say; it's what you ask. That's what's going to get it started, and I find that's broken everywhere.

That's why we hammer so hard on research. When you talk to clients and you've really done your homework, you can feel that there's a different level of engagement because of the quality of the questions that you're asking. If you haven't invested any time or if this is one you're sliding by on without research, you either ask superficial questions or you revert to talking about yourself. Those are the only two options you have.

MCNews: If you could give our readers one piece of advice, what would it be?

Stevenson: I would say to keep the integrity of the consulting business as pure as it can be. Because of the trust that's been broken, people look at you differently these days than they did five years ago. We've been through a bloodbath, but clients need somebody to help them, and that's where consultants come in. But I think they've got to be very careful to go back to their roots and approach clients with all of the tools and process that created trust in the past. Because I sense it's a little haywire right now.

MCNews: Thanks very much for your time.

If you want to find out more about Tom Stevenson, email him at TomS@austin.rr.com.