

# Catching the Client Vision - the Power of Humility

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Don't you love those initial project meetings. I'm talking about the meetings where the client or manager lays out his or her vision. They come in with a gleam in their eye. They often have an organized pitch well-worn from much practice trying it out on wives, husbands and colleagues. In many cases they throw the pitch and look for a cathartic moment in your eye - that moment when you say "Oh yeah - I get it! Very cool!"

Such folks are visionaries and innovators. After all, they are the ones who asked those big "what if" questions.

"What if we automated approval?"

"What if we tied shipping to sales?"

"What if we created an online portal for our inventory management?"

"What ifs" are asked by folks who dare to dream. They are the ones who often conceive of a project and bring it to us. It may be hard to recognize, but that first meeting is really a sales meeting. On the surface, maybe you are trying to sell your services to them. But what is really happening in most cases, is that they are trying to sell the vision to you.

It's important for such folks to believe that you have "bought into" the vision they have for their product or project. They don't want an end product birthed in hapless drudgery. They want a product built by a team (or individual) who believes in what they are trying to do. Zeal and enthusiasm are not a panacea - but they are an important adhesive in team dynamics. When members of the team are enthusiastic about a project it has a better chance of success and a lower incidence of infighting. In the words of St. Paul - "love covers a multitude of sins."

In any case, as a project manager you have some choices at that first meeting. Knowing that your customer needs you to be enthused about his or her project gives you a position of strength. But, as Uncle Ben said to Peter Parker right before he drowned in his rice bowl, "with great power comes great responsibility".

For example, you might act detached and focus only on the details that matter to your role. You could condescend and pretend to buy into the vision. You might look for ways to expand the vision and project in a self-serving effort to "get more" out of it (this is most likely if you started in sales - ha). You might adopt a "wait and see" attitude and be inscrutable (meaning no scruting). Or, you could warm up to the vision and help the client dream, while keeping his or her best interest at heart.

That last item seems noble, but it is also in your best interest. Remember, nothing succeeds like success, and a successful project will always benefit you - even if you don't like the project itself.

What do I mean by "warm up" to the vision. I mean adopt a position of open mindedness and possibility. I don't mean that you should lie or pretend that you are "in to the hilt". I don't mean that you should ignore the facts or not issue appropriate warnings and cautions. I only mean that you should be walk in humility about what you know and that you should not throw cold water on the clients idea out of ego or

self-promotion. In fact, even if you think the project is a load of tripe you should still consider giving it a chance in humility - recognizing that you have only one viewpoint.

In business, as in life, we have only a small fraction of the big picture. We see the "technology" part of the picture. Here's a news flash, Technology can't solve every problem. It can't even solve every business problem. It can't even solve every IT problem. Your client doubtless knows more about many things than you do. And (I know this is painful) he or she may have an idea that you think is bogus - but may actually work! Think about it! A sales manager, or business owner may be able to conceive of an idea that seems crazy, laughable, poo-pooable - but may actually work and thrive.

In 2 recent cases we have worked on projects where I was almost ashamed to take the money. While I did my best to be positive yet thoughtful I wanted the client to know that there was a good chance the project would not thrive and be successful (without using the words "big" and "flop" together). In each case I found myself saying repeatedly, "You know your business and customers better than we do but..." as a caveat designed to allow me to introduce cautions and warnings. It was also a "cover your butt" clause built into my client communication. In each case (thankfully) the client was unflappable.

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Now, each time I go into that initial meeting I try to focus on what the client is telling me and catch his or her vision. If I stumble up against one of my own prejudices or opinions I try and take a step back and evaluate it from the clients point of view - or at least acknowledge that I'm not always the answer man.