



## **Handling Difficult Client Conversations**

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## Clients can be difficult

Let's face it - sometimes it's difficult dealing with clients, particularly when you have to tell them something you know they don't want to hear, or when a client has a complaint.

Often, conflicts arise because clients feel you don't understand their point of view. It's easy to forget that clients - even business clients - have an emotional investment in their legal matter. To you, it may be just another case. But to the client, it's their life, their livelihood, or their business.

### When those difficult or uncomfortable client conversations arise, how can you handle them?

**Mirror the client's thoughts.** Let the client tell you what the issue is, and then reflect it back to the client. This way, the client knows they're being heard, and you ensure that you understand their issue.

**Focus on the client.** The key to resolution is concentrating on the client's feelings and the client's desired outcome, rather than focusing on yourself or on the work that you have to do. For example, if a client asks for something in a rush, respond by acknowledging the client's sense of urgency and how it affects their goals - not by telling them how much work you have to do or why what they're asking is impossible.

**Acknowledge the client's feelings.** You don't have to agree, but there's no sense in arguing with how a client feels. Acknowledging a client's feelings by saying something like, "I can tell that you're upset about this" will begin to defuse the situation.

**Let clients know that they're not alone.** If this particular problem is a common one, or many clients are frustrated by the same thing, tell the client as a way to validate what they are feeling. Even better, if you have had a similar experience and can talk to the client about your own feelings and reactions in their situation.

**Work toward a resolution based on where you are now.** Once the client is calmer and you've acknowledged them, you can begin to gather information that can help you to reach a solution. Offer the client options for resolution, even if you can't meet their specific demand.

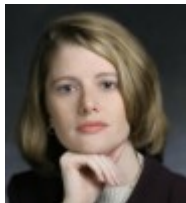
**Focus on the positive.** Instead of saying no or telling a client what you can't do and why, tell them what you can do. Explain the options in terms of the client's goals (i.e. because I know that you don't want to drag this litigation out..." or "Since you want to keep costs down..."

Don't retreat or get defensive - it only escalates the confrontation.

**Lay the groundwork for bad news - and go slowly.** Resist the urge to just 'get it over with' by blurting out the bad news all at once. When you know the client isn't going to be happy about what you have to tell them, start out by acknowledging the client's desired outcome or goals, introduce what you are going to discuss, or explain that there are a number of different strategies that can be employed to move forward with their matter. Be sure to give the client reasons for those options and for what occurred. After you've delivered the bad news, let the client know that you empathize with their position.

**Know your boundaries and set limits.** Often confrontations arise when the unexpected occurs. You can reduce many common difficult client situations by being prepared and setting boundaries at the outset of the engagement. Clients who can't abide by your processes or boundaries will often self-identify themselves, offering you the opportunity to explore the situation before a confrontation occurs or the chance to decline the representation. There's no reason to tolerate an abusive client!

**Get help.** While these suggestions may seem simple, they're not always easy to implement. Working with a coach or getting some client service training can help you develop the skills necessary to handle difficult client situations.



**Need help dealing with difficult clients?** Contact me to see how I can help: [Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com](mailto:Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com).

*Allison C. Shields, Esq., President of Legal Ease Consulting, Inc. is a former practicing attorney and law firm manager who helps law firms create more productive, profitable and enjoyable law practices by providing practice management and business development coaching and consulting. Don't miss the free resources available at her website: [www.LawyerMeltdown.com](http://www.LawyerMeltdown.com) and blog: [www.LegalEaseConsulting.com](http://www.LegalEaseConsulting.com).*