Deconstructing “The Client”

Thinking and talking about clients in broad, generalized terms undermines the relationships firms spend so much energy to cultivate.

By Douglas B. Richardson

The bar in the TV show *"Cheers"* earned a fanatically loyal clientele because it was "the place where everybody knows your name." In law, as in watering holes, the people paying the tab like and need to be seen and treated as individuals. Yet law firm lawyers often think and talk about clients in broad, generalized terms, as if their interests, needs and personalities were indistinguishable. The frequent effect is to undermine the relationships firms spend so much energy to cultivate.

In scores of Edge legal project management workshops, I have been struck by how imprecisely and stereotypically law firm lawyers describe their customers. To hear them tell it, there's a single monolith out there called, "the client." They ask sweeping questions like, "What is the client demanding these days?" and answer them with equally sweeping overgeneralizations: "Clients are clamping down on outside legal spend." or "Clients are demanding greater predictability." Full disclosure: I'm occasionally guilty of this myself. I sometimes say things like, "Project management is not just a set of work processes and measures; it's a communication engine that can significantly improve the relationship between lawyer and client."

At each point during a project, effective communication demands a precisely-identified referent. It requires a clear distinction between client players, their positions, their roles and their interests. Is "the client" a company, its corporate management, its general counsel, its collective legal management or department heads, its worker bees? Does the phrase include various ancillary stakeholders as well as those directly responsible for legal work? If your firm is engaged by Amalgamated Widget, are *they* "the client?" If the client relationship partner has separate communication pathways with both senior management and the general counsel, who is "the client?" For the law firm's CFO, maybe "the client" is just an electronic address for the e-billing invoice. For a senior associate serving as project manager on an engagement, "the client" may be her counterpart on an in-house legal staff. For a younger associate, "the client" may either be some mystical power figure he'll never meet personally or a lower-level staff lawyer responsible for collecting interrogatory response information.

Above and beyond a client's formal roles and responsibilities, effective client relationships also must consider the personal face of client relationships: Jack, the golf fanatic. Jill, who hates reading a lot of emails. Sam who goes ballistic over typos in correspondence, or Sue, a rabid Twitter and Facebook fan. Personalizing the client relationship appropriately is a fine art.

If you don't know who your client is, you don't know who you are accountable to - and your colleagues don't either. So let's all resolve to be more succinct. Henceforth when you tell me, "We just heard back from the client." imagine I'm in your face: *Just which client do you mean?*