

Winter 1999

Today's Engineer

### short circuits

- **Engineering in Pop Culture:** The Far-Reaching Effects of Global Positioning
- **World Bytes:** World Population Projections
- **Capitol Shavings:** Be an Informed Citizen

### viewpoints

- **IEEE-USA President's Column:** Fostering Relationships, Finding Solutions
- **Reader Poll:** Would You Choose a Personal Savings Account?
- **Reader Feedback**

### for careers

# The Client is ALWAYS/NEVER Right

## The Love-Hate Relationship Between Consultants and Their Clients

**by Edmond H. Weiss**

The expression *always/never* — in case you haven't worked with data dictionaries — means either always or never.<sup>1</sup> This article really asks two questions:

- Is the client always right?
- Is the client never right?

In three decades as a management and communications consultant, I have come to believe that this paradox best characterizes the relationship between consultants and clients. On one hand, clients are customers and, therefore, always right and always entitled to what they want. (A *client* may be defined as *the person or group who must judge the engagement valuable.*) On the other hand, clients are people with problems they cannot solve, sometimes of their own making, and they may

- [TE Career Archives](#)
- [Career Navigator](#)
- [IEEE-USA Salary Calculator](#)
- [IEEE-USA Consultants Database](#)
- [IEEE-USA Salary Survey](#)
- [IEEE Job Site](#)
- [IEEE SPECTRUM Careers](#)
- [IEEE Careers & Employment](#)

## public policy

- [TE Policy Archives](#)
- [IEEE-USA Policy Forum](#)
- [IEEE-USA Legislative Action Center](#)

not be aware of everything that needs to be done.

Teachers and mentors disagree on these theories. In graduate school, teachers told me "never believe the client's assessment of the problem." But in a contract research lab, my superior advised me that "the only failure of a consultant is to leave the client unhappy."

Granted, on some engagements, the issue never arises. Such projects are well-defined, with specific objectives and a shared perspective between client and consultant — simple software applications, minor grading and land management problems, small-scale facilities renovations. These cases do not resolve the question; rather, they point out the difference between a *consultant* and a *contractor*.

### Consultant or Contractor

Most of the people and companies who call themselves consultants are flattering themselves. *Contract workers* — people who hire themselves out, sometimes by the hour, for well-defined technical services within uncontroversial specifications — are consultants in only the most self-promoting sense of the term. And like service providers in any business, they have little trouble accepting the maxim that the client is always right. Some contractors call this *The Golden Rule* — the one with the gold makes the rules. Contractors are loyal to their contract and, if they want more work, are slavishly responsive to the demands of the client.

But consultants are different. In addition to being loyal to the contract and client, they are also loyal to the canons of their profession, the discipline of science — a set of issues and criteria that are larger than the current engagement. Often this set of loyalties is synthesized into the term *professionalism* or *professional integrity*. According to human resources experts, these very factors make professional employees hard to manage and motivate, causing consultants to be in occasional conflict with their clients.

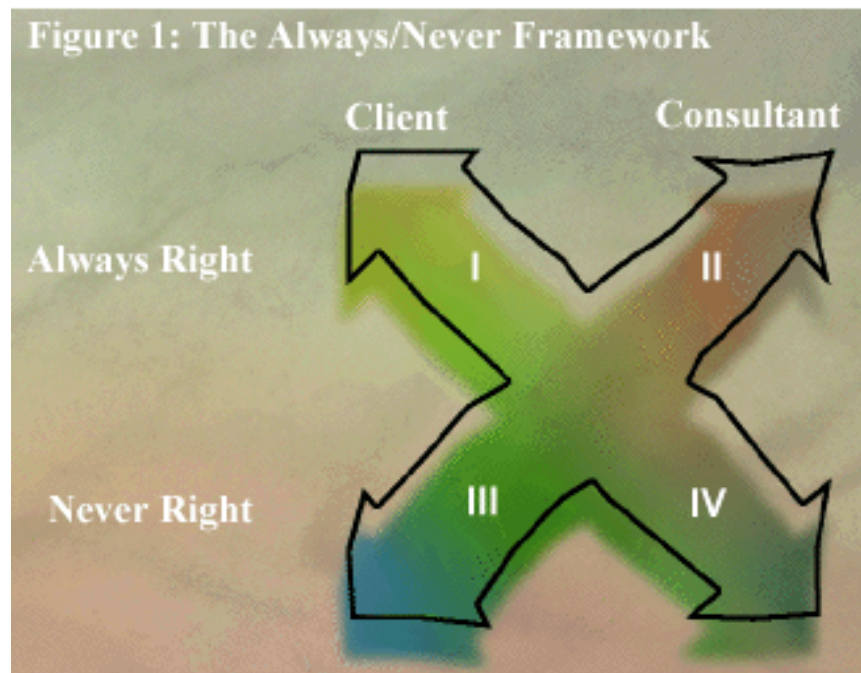
To illustrate the distinction ... A *contractor* can monitor changes in airborne particulate matter; a *consultant* might want a municipality to shut down its incinerator. A *contractor* can write code to spec; a *consultant* might recommend the phase-out of the obsolete program under repair. A *contractor* will draw a plan for a new school; a *consultant* might see the school as too big,

too small, or unnecessary. Or, (a common experience in my own practice) a *contractor* will write and assemble the technical proposal that the *consultant* would have advised against writing at all.

Under the best of circumstances, the client and consultant educate each other. In other cases, they systematically misunderstand and misjudge each other, so that neither is satisfied.

### Always/Never Right: The Stereotypes

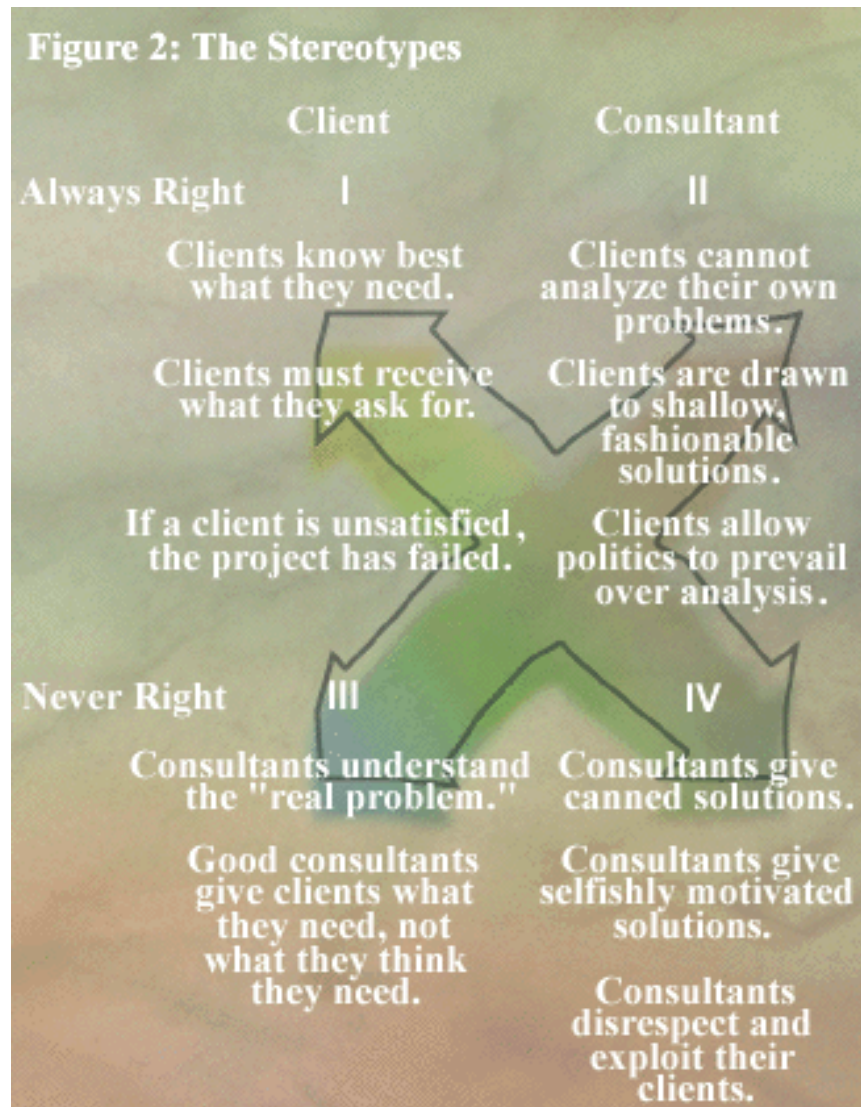
The *Always/NeverRight* construct is a useful framework for exploring the patterns of expectations, prejudices, and stereotypes that the parties bring to the engagement. As Figure 1 shows, there is a 2x2 array of possibilities corresponding to the value we assign to the judgment of the participants. Note that, not only does the *Always/NeverRight* construct apply to clients but also, reciprocally, to consultants. Even after only one or two experiences with consultants, clients develop expectations about the character and behavior of consultants, often more intense and problematical than the consultants' expectations about the clients.



Notice also that arrows link Quadrant I with IV and II with III. It does not necessarily follow that, whoever thinks the client always right, will think the consultant always wrong (or vice-versa), but experience shows that these stereotypes do tend to be complementary and, in their most extreme forms, make a

consulting engagement quite unpleasant.

Figure 2 captures some of the stereotypical attitudes found in each quadrant:



### Quadrant I: The Client is Always Right

Quadrant I contains the most "correct" attitudes; indeed it represents the official position of every business professional, especially since the advent of Total Quality. The underlying logic is simple. To find out what applications and systems people need, ask them. To find out the best way to solve a community's transportation problems or environmental concerns, just ask enough folks and resolve the conflicting answers as deftly as possible. To determine what training employees need, let them write the curriculum.

The ontology of this position is that *clients, by definition, cannot*

be wrong about what they need, because there is no higher criterion for correctness. Granted, the consultant will offer alternatives, suggest solutions, or make recommendations. But the client has the right to reject the consultant's advice, demand more options, or even flatly disregard the advice — in much the same way that juries have the right to nullify the judge's instructions on the law.

Consultants must even be cautious about "educating" the clients, lest it appear that they are foisting an unwanted plan from their inventory of "canned" solutions (see Quadrant IV). Such skeptical clients often try to get consultants to alter their reports and recommendations, to revise or "soften" the parts they object to. (Most federally funded research contracts, for example, call for a *Preliminary Final Report* and a *Revised Final Report*, the latter reflecting, among other things, the changes demanded by the sponsor.)



...Clients are customers and, therefore always right...clients have problems they cannot solve themselves...

Ironically, consultants devoted to this way of thinking are sometimes criticized for "parroting" the clients' recommendations and not providing enough independent technical content.

### **Quadrant II: The Consultant is Always Right**

Although many consultants think the client is always right (or at least claim to), few clients think the consultant is always right. This attitude is usually expressed (privately) by consultants themselves or, sometimes, by zealous advocates for the consultant in the client's organization.

The attitudes in Quadrant II may seem arrogant to outsiders, but they usually reflect the consultant's belief that the criteria for designing or selecting solutions are broader and deeper than the short-term preferences and expectations of the client. Such consultants believe that *what clients need depends on more complicated factors than those the client can appreciate*, and that easy and obvious solutions are nearly always less appropriate than subtle, difficult solutions.

Consultants in this quadrant tend to think of their solutions as informed and rational, while the clients' preferences tend to be shortsighted and — the strongest opprobrium in the technical professional's vocabulary — political. A political decision, from this perspective, is a placation of, or pandering to, the preferences of the most powerful people in the client organization, rather than a rational conclusion based on a scientific, competent appraisal of the problem and alternatives.

### **Quadrant III: The Client is Always Wrong**

Quadrant III is the domain of the haughty consultants who believe that, far from providing well-defined services, they are rescuing clients from their own ignorance and ineptitude. One sees this attitude in technical experts, like some software developers, and often in other consultant-like professions, such as medicine.

The basis for these stereotypes is the belief that *the definition of problems and solutions is a difficult, esoteric process, not one that can be performed by collecting the opinions of non-experts*. Astonishingly, even some programmers believe that user requirements are too shallow to be taken seriously, especially given the ease with which non-experts can be sold on faddish, over-hyped technology. (I once heard a consultant tell his clients that he could explain the new system to them but not *understand* it for them!)

### **Quadrant IV: The Consultant is Always Wrong**

Quadrant IV reflects the attitudes of those clients who have had least one unsatisfactory experience with a consultant. But those who consider consultants "always wrong" are rarely commenting on the competence or expertise of consultants. Rather, the issue is the *perceived tendency of consultants to offer standard, "canned" solutions to new and unique problems*. The kernel of

truth here is that consultants tend to do just that, either because they have a proprietary or ideological commitment to an existing technology or solution strategy or, in the less flattering case, because they are trying to mine past projects for additional revenues.

From a short-term economic perspective, it is far better for consultants to sell their current stock of solutions and services than to create new ones for the current engagement. (In my seminars, I say that the goal of a technical proposal is to move one's inventory without appearing to do so.) Genuinely new technology — software, hardware, seminars, publications, processes — is usually too expensive to charge to a particular client and, therefore, its costs have to be recovered in later engagements.



**...Contractors are loyal to their contract and responsive to client demands...**

The most intense advocates for Quadrant IV tend to be former consultants who are now part of client organizations, who know where and how consultants make their profits and where the occasional abuse occurs. Such critics often insist on adding performance clauses and other accountability mechanisms into the consulting contracts, to ensure (they believe) that the consultant will respect the client and give what is asked for.

### **Discipline and Tactics for Consultants**

What are the practical implications of this analysis? First, it should be clear that the attitudes inherent in Quadrants III and IV, although they may be widespread and even understandable, are counterproductive and unprofessional. In any business or professional relationship, nothing can be gained by doubting the fundamental intelligence or integrity of the other participant. In such a setting, projects are likely to fail, confirming the pessimistic expectations of the participants. Since many reading this article are likely consultants (and only sometimes clients), the main warning is against Quadrant III — *the Client is Always Wrong*. It reflects a smugness and superiority that, ironically, undercuts the intellectual authority of otherwise talented consultants.

Next, it is important for every consultant to decide if they are really a contractor. If the real objective of every project is to provide well-defined services that please the client and produce a string of follow-on contracts (a kind of customer satisfaction annuity), then Quadrant I, *The Client is Always Right*, is the only place to be. Such consultants/contractors will injure themselves if they subscribe to any other view. Indeed, a key to their success will be to stop thinking of themselves as consultants at all, a title that can encourage more independence from the client's preferences than a contractor can afford.

For example, once I was invited to develop a training plan for a group of employees at a New York bank. Thinking I was a consultant, I advised the client that the group of employees she had identified lacked the education and experience to benefit from the proposed training. The client, however, thought I was a contractor, hired to give what she wanted, and gave her business to someone else.

Of course, one sometimes hears that consultants who give in to clients slavishly will eventually lose their credibility. I doubt it. In all my years as both consultant and contractor, I've never seen a contractor lose business by being too attentive to the client.

But what if the consultant is truly a consultant — at least on some projects? Is it appropriate to espouse the Quadrant II attitude — *The Consultant is Always Right*?

Obviously, the Quadrant II posture is too arrogant and abrasive to be expressed aloud in a business relationship. But, moderated with mild language and polite manners, it may be the wisest business strategy. So long as the consultant has a wisdom that the client lacks, and so long as the consultant is determined to serve the best interests of the client, there is nothing wrong with an approach in which the main aim of the consultant is to educate and enlighten the client, rather than to provide instant gratification.

### **Case Study**

To illustrate, consider this slightly disguised case from my own consulting experience: A municipality hires an engineering firm to perform the Environmental Impact Study (EIS) for a new waste disposal project. It chooses this consultant, in part, *because of his firm's reputation for producing extremely clear and readable reports*. When the environmental assessments are submitted, the

report is so strikingly clear that the municipal authorities are extremely dissatisfied; they fear that the risks and hazards associated with the project are so clearly explained and highlighted in the report that the press and public will surely notice them and react unfavorably. The client asks the firm to revise the report — **not to change content** — but to:

- eliminate most of the helpful headings and sideheadings
- strip away summaries, marginal glosses, and overviews
- fuse short paragraphs into longer paragraphs
- remove all boldfacing and italics aside from headings and technical terms
- move technical appendixes into the body of the document



**...Consultants are loyal to the contract, and canons of their profession...**

### What's a Contractor/ Consultant to Do?

Ironically, the client was originally drawn to this consulting firm by its reputation for readable reports. Instead, the client decides it wants the EIS to look more like a traditional engineering report — inaccessible and intimidating to the non-technical reader. On the surface, it's a simple enough request, not even involving a single word of technical content.

But alas, more is at stake. The client's request is not merely stylistic; it is self-serving and disingenuous. Acceding to the request will make the client's life undeservedly easier. Should a consultant make the change?

A *contractor* would — and should. The client is entitled to exactly the kind of final product it desires and, moreover, the contractor that fails to deliver it is jeopardizing future engagements.

But a *consultant* must think carefully before proceeding. Can the environmental consultant be indifferent to the attempt to suppress environmental discourse? Can a firm with a reputation for unusually readable reports put its name on a report that is especially unreadable? Can any professional consultant, in any field, deliberately alter a report so as to make it less clear and accessible, just because a client prefers it that way?

In the actual case described, I advised the head of the consulting firm to refuse to change the report. I argued that, not only would it damage the reputation of his company, but also that it would be a disservice to the taxpayers who paid for the study and might even endanger the environment of the community.<sup>2</sup> I was overruled. And the firm went on to do other expensive projects for the same client.

The waste disposal plant was built.

 **Back**

---

**1** For a succinct introduction to data dictionary conventions see Yourdon, E., *Modern Structured Analysis*, Yourdon Press/Prentice Hall 1989, pp.191-196

**2** For more, see E.H. Weiss, "An Unreadable EIS is an Environmental Hazard," *The Environmental Professional*, Volume 11, No 3 1989, pp.236-240

---

*Edmond H. Weiss is an Associate Professor of Communications at Fordham University Graduate School of Business, and a Fellow of The Society for Technical Communication. ([edweiss@aol.com](mailto:edweiss@aol.com))*

© Copyright 2003, The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc.

# Seminars, Courses & Speeches

## Business/Professional Communication

### **How to Sell in Writing (Proposals & Business Cases)**

The most important business writing is the *advocacy document*, the pitch for funds or approval.

- Analyzing your audience and Win Strategy
- Presenting the “case” with logic and persuasiveness
- Using business graphics to demonstrate and prove

### **How to Write *Globally***

International business requires sensitivity to the language, culture, and expectations of the international business partner.

- Editing for clarity and readability
- Screening for figurative and idiomatic confusion
- Designing accessible layouts and appropriate feedback paths

### **Final Draft: The *Especially* Clear Sentence**

Good writing is *rewriting*; only revision can assure clarity, correct tone, freedom from errors, and readability.

- Emphasis and making your point
- Twenty flaws in first-draft sentences
- Style-checking software: Can you trust it?

### **The Art of the Pitch**

A well-made presentation is a small five-act play, where each element contributes to effectiveness.

- Strategic planning and design
- Managing stage fright
- Using PowerPoint™ and other presentation tools
- Handling questions and objections
- Creating useful handouts

### **The Art of Effective E-Mail**

To use e-mail well, the writer must exploit its strengths and adapt to its limitations.

- Attention-getting subject lines
- E-mail style and grammar
- Discipline and etiquette for e-mailers
- To attach or to embed ...

# Technical Communication

## **A Writing System for Technical Professionals**

Technical professionals cannot achieve their professional goals unless they write their correspondence, reports, and documentation with power and precision.

- Creating documents as engineered information products
- Eliminating common errors and time-wasters
- Writing for *nontechnical* readers

## **Preparing English Tech Documents for International Readers**

Although customers and clients around the world read English quite well, it is still necessary to edit international technical information for the E2 reader.

- Making documents *culture-free* and *culture-fair*
- Correcting problems of style, idiom, and syntax
- Using controlled English
- Adapting to local sensitivities and cultures

## **Effective Quality Manuals/ Usable Procedure & User's Manuals**

A manual is a device that supports people in their work; when well designed, it teaches procedures, enforces standards, and saves money.

- Documenting ISO 9000 and other quality standards
- Replacing unreadable and unmaintainable prose with scripts, tables, and diagrams
- Testing for usability and enforceability
- Designing modular, maintainable publications
- Storyboarding and project management

## **The Craft of User Requirements & Functional Specs**

Those who use information technology and those who create or acquire it must communicate their needs and expectations clearly, especially at the beginning of the design cycle.

- How **User:Developer** communication fails
- Beyond the Waterfall Model
- Tools and processes for functional specification

# Organizational Communication

## **Meetings that Work**

Meetings should be energizing and productive—never boring or a perceived waste of time.

- Objectives and agendas: staying on message
- Two warring cultures: ratification vs. exploration
- Roles and games played by participants
- Secrets of master facilitators
- Cultural variables in international meetings

## **There's Only Now: Managing the Professional's Time**

Despite the array of electronic time management tools, too many professionals feel overworked, stressed, and never quite on top of their work.

- Attitudes about time
- Five immutable rules of time management
- Time management traps and how to avoid them
- Products and tools and how to choose/adapt them
- Getting long-term goals and projects into your short-term calendar

## **Raising Culture Consciousness**

An urgent need for international business professionals is to learn, and adapt to, the culture of the communities or countries where they wish to do business.

- Dimensions of difference
- Context and communication
- Individualism versus collectivism
- Timing and pacing (the hidden dimension)

## **Turning Words into Money: Business Plans & Cases**

Projects need funding, capital; even the best ideas can fail for lack of a convincing business plan/case.

- What impresses funding sources
- Missions, visions, and goals
- The logic of the 'business case'
- Clear, persuasive language and graphics
- Presentations for executives and sponsors

# Speeches/Short Programs for Professional Gatherings and Meetings

## **How to Sell an Idea**

Why won't people follow your advice? There are eight barriers that keep us from accepting new plans and approaches... and specific techniques to overcome them.

## **The Secret of Professional Fulfillment**

The key to mental health and productivity—on the job or at home—is *equilibrium*: keeping all of life's eight competing values in balance. The tendency is to neglect some while pursuing others, a practice that leads to anxiety and alienation.

## **Re-Inventing the Memo**

Do you have trouble getting your point across to co-workers? A memo is NOT a work of literature, but, rather, an engineered product, designed for clarity, power, and speed. Twelve tactics increase the chance that a memo (or an e-mail) will be read.

## **The Odor of Mendacity—Why People Don't Believe You Anymore...**

In school, we learn ways to "improve" the truth by puffing up our writing with words that inflate, obscure, and disguise. Business and professional speech and writing are filled with these bad language habits, which make us sound as though we are hedging and evading—even when we have nothing to hide.

## **Does Grammar Count in the Era of E-Mail?**

Is e-mail the end of 'correct' communication? Do spelling, punctuation, and grammar matter anymore? Only as much as the recipient of the message matters. All professionals should care about the image they communicate, even in their informal messages.

## **Business Basics for Technical Professionals**

The most important technical question is "How's Business?" Technical professionals must learn to pitch improvements and changes in their departments through business-savvy business cases: proposals aimed at one's own management. Business cases must show how the new procedures or technology will either make or save money, and within an acceptable number of months.