

Client Success

Using Creativity, Connections & Human Potential

Public accountants perform a wide variety of services with many different types of products linked to them. We have tax returns for all types of business entities and individual needs; we prepare audits and review reports for our business clients; we compile information and analyze all aspects of business and personal data looking for new efficiencies, challenges and ways to improve our clients' operations, as well as their financial well-being. We even help with bookkeeping of all different forms of client needs.

We are proud of that scope of work and, because of us, the world runs better on information that people can rely on. As we know, the CPA profession is rated the "most trusted business adviser" and we can be proud of that, as well. But there is an interesting twist.

If you look at Kathy Ryan's article on CPA.com (cpa.com/blog/5-key-traits-trusted-advisors), which outlines traits that the trusted adviser needs to have, they are interestingly not accounting focused. Rather, they are more personal, interactive, collaborative and conversational.

According to the article, these are the five key qualities key to being a trusted adviser:

- **Altruism:** Trusted advisers always put client needs ahead of theirs.
- **The ability to listen:** A trusted adviser listens carefully to what clients say—and don't say.
- **A deep well of experience:** Specific knowledge of a topic will get you only so far with a client. But what will really impress a client is your ability to discuss confidently how the rules have been implemented at other companies and play out in real life.
- **A trusted advisor has a knack for understanding the politics, rising above it and using a diplomatic—yet direct—**



approach to keep the client moving down the right path in an efficient manner.

- **Candidness:** Honesty is the best policy in any partnership, and that's particularly true between clients and consultants.

These critical components are not the result of a focus on getting our products out the door. They are the result of a professional life where interactive soft skills and conversation are the essential platform with which to connect, while interacting on a regular basis with our clients and our team members. A trusted adviser is a leader of change—and change is what clients want, whether they say it or not, as this quote highlights: "72% of small business owners have changed their CPA or accounting firm because their firm did not give proactive

advice—only reactive service." (*Accounted, July 2017*)

Going from reactive to proactive, while being a trusted adviser, we might consider altering our perspective of our value to clients and how we get there.

As the characteristics of a trusted adviser indicate, we are not just in the business of accounting, tax returns, etc. We are in the people business—being of service. We might even find ourselves closer to other service businesses, as Southwest Airlines co-founder Herb Kelleher shared: "We are in the service business; it's incidental that we fly airplanes."

To begin to be that trusted adviser, being

present with others in a way that your ideas, agenda and opinions don't distract from the needs of your clients is an amazing step forward. Otherwise, you can't be altruistic.

It is important that you don't miss all the good stuff you do need to know from and with the clients.

Having the bandwidth for

listening and interacting attentively makes the difference.

Remember that each situation is unique. Thinking you have an answer, especially too quickly, can turn a challenging situation into a disaster. Thinking you know because you did it before is deadly. Relying on what you did last time is dangerous and inconsiderate.

Your experience needs to be powerful and accessible while you allow clients' knowledge to be integral to your knowledge and blended in a way that's collaborative, supportive and engaging. Trusted advisers learn to come

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alongside clients and others—in all situations, good bad or indifferent—with healthy appreciation for the forward movement of what is being considered for change or elimination.

If we truly want to be trusted advisers—and if consultant Rob Nixon is correct that “business advisory services will be 80 percent of revenue in future,” enhancing our more

situation or the business’ personality. Again, look to those trusted adviser traits: Find out what happened.

1. Be open to a more collaborative

approach. Having the answers to everything can limit the true potential of moving the situation, the process and the challenge forward or resolving it.

2. Focus on always learning, acquiring

paper distributor. I brought in 75 managers and supervisors from around the company for a three-day exploration. I was humbled by their concern for the well-being of the business and their willingness to go the extra mile. Their caring for others was enormous. I was awed by their commitment, knowledge and let’s get it

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intangible skills (that we might have learned yesterday or last year or five years ago) is critical. To advance this, we must begin cultivating the skills, talents and experiences that help us embody the five traits listed above—and more.

With that, we can then truly help our clients to cultivate the success they seek.

Interestingly, these are not linear traits or characteristics. They require a myriad of training, experience, coaching, mentoring and, most importantly, practice—much of which is interactive and in person.

You can cultivate skills, talents, friendships, relationships and, in this case, relationships with your clients. This is not a power over process, but more of a power with relationship (*Mary Parker Follett, The Prophet of Management, Edited Pauline Graham and Introduction Peter Drucker, Page 103*) where the process is collaborative, respectful and mutual. You do it together to cultivate their success and your acumen—plus you get paid.

Embrace more of a consultative approach, in which we all add value—“we” meaning all stakeholders, including ourselves.

I have rebuilt or turned around more than 100 businesses and many of them were a product of an individual or a group coming in doing it the way it had been done somewhere else—without understanding the unique

information and impressions. While doing that, connect and interact with stakeholders. Their unique perspectives can make the world of difference—*doing it together*. As Michael Jordan is quoted: “Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships.”

3. Focus on your client’s needs first, and make sure they are real needs.

Remember to be altruistic and maintain an unselfish, selfless concern for the well-being of others. It’s too easy to see a situation and want to solve it and get it over with, versus truly embracing and understanding the real dynamics.

We estimate from our work with CPAs and their clients that client needs for assistance, in particular the business side, is five to 15 times the current annual firm billings to the client. There is so much natural true work—work you never need to sell, but only need to identify and work with clients to help them embrace the next steps that they need to make.


Let’s start cultivating a process that helps our clients and helps us grow, as well. If you look at those traits of the trusted adviser, I can think of several ancillary skills and capabilities that would add value to our personal toolbox:

- Humility and appreciation of others.
- We achieved a turnaround of a large

started mindset.

- Accept that we only know a piece of the puzzle and appreciate what we bring to the process.
- Collaboration, when pure in nature, is one of the most powerful forces we have. Not tapping into it is about missing possibilities.
- Appreciate that our cultivation of ourselves and those around us can be the purest form of achievement.

To be a trusted adviser or collaborator—which is my desired description—is an ongoing learning process. We don’t ever arrive; we simply get better and better. That is exactly what our clients want us to be—advancing together for everyone’s success.

For an expanded discussion of what our profession might do for ourselves, our team members, our clients and other stakeholders, see “Realities & Perspectives of Public Accounting” in the September 2019 issue of *California CPA* magazine (<http://californiacpa.org/?issueID=96&pageID=13>). 

Mark H. Fowler is president of Stowe Management Corporation, a member of the CalCPA MAP Committee and co-chair of the CalCPA Los Angeles Chapter MAP Committee. You can reach him at estowemanagement@aol.com.