

Herding Cats – It's Impossible... Or Is It?

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HERDING CATS

It's Impossible... Or Is It?

The negotiator's most important skill

By Lee Thornbury

It doesn't appear in your job description but the most important job skill required of you is cat herding. No kidding. Procurement and sourcing personnel spend more time keeping members of the business team, legal team, others on the procurement team, vendors' sales people and various other players moving in the same direction at the same time than they ever spend trying to negotiate and close a deal.

And heaven knows none of those folks resemble synchronized swimmers, though it would be accurate to say that as a procurement person, you may have an overwhelming urge to drown them at difficult times.

Just like cats, your internal clients come in all shapes and sizes; with different colors and stripes; personalities and "quirks". And they will all demand all of your attention all of the time. They will want to be petted, fed, brushed, not brushed, let into the house, let out of the house, let into the house, picked up, put down, put on the bed/chair/sofa/ windowsill, etc., etc., etc. They will hiss and spit and purr and meow and yowl, sometimes all at the same time. Some have claws, and others are neutered and de-clawed. But, in the end, they can all become fluffy little pussycats. Really.

As a sourcing professional, one of your primary challenges is to preserve the project's momentum without getting run over. Many clients seem to think that you are always sitting at your desk waiting for them to call. They have a compulsive need to be certain you know every minute detail of their project. They want you to appreciate how it will save the company from falling off the edge of the earth financially. They want to assure that you are "on top of things" as the process unfolds. Needless to say, there will always be more than one job in your queue, and you will more likely than not have to spend time answering anxious inquiries from people who apparently do not have anything else on their radar screen.

Three steps to get them to purr contentedly

So just how do you get the cat off your back and purring contentedly? You start by taking preventative steps.

One - Be direct and honest with your clients. Clearly state, at appropriate and frequent intervals, that you have a number of other projects, which are all significant and deserve the same level of your attention as their project. Ask if they would want you to be any less diligent with your other clients than you are in handling their project?

Two - set your own deadlines and goals for each project. Know when you expect milestones to be completed, but use discretion in sharing these deadlines or goals with clients. As soon as you

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do that the deadlines will be written down on your client's calendar; you will be called religiously to see if, why, when, or why not that goal has been achieved. Equally important, don't allow clients to set your deadlines or goals. Inevitably you will be blamed for missing those deadlines or goals, irrespective of their own actions, or inactions, or any other projects that you may have on your desk.

Three - prioritize your workload constantly and consistently. Pick a method that works for you: the tried and true First-In-First-Out method, or the Last-In-First-Out method, or ranking according to seniority of person driving the project, or the size of the deal. But, whatever method you choose, use it every time, Remember that there will always be "hair on fire" emergencies, and year-end "I've got to spend my budget" crunches, so allocate your time accordingly. If you don't, you'll be tending cat herds day and night, and have no personal life. That's not what your mother meant when she said, "Aim to be a high achiever in life." It is, however, exactly what she meant when she said, "Life is not fair. Get over it. Now."

Helping them understand priorities

When your client calls you (frequently) to make sure you (still) understand the importance of their project, diplomatically assure them that you are fully aware of the situation. Then ask them to help you allocate your time. Do they want you to spend time talking or meeting with them to review the "significance" of their project? Or do they want you to use that same time actually working on their project?

Occasionally, a client will call and demand that you must finish their project first, asserting that their project is more important than anything else you could possibly be doing is. I once had a client call me at the funeral home during the wake for my grandmother. They couldn't understand why I wasn't at the office working on their project. I am not making this up!

If the client really feels that everything else on your plate should be pushed aside to allow their project to move ahead, ask them to send you an email stating what they are demanding and explaining why their project should move to the top of the stack. Then tell them that, instead of working on their project, you will devote the necessary time to forwarding their note to their boss, your boss and the bosses of all the other folks who have projects in line in front of this particular person. Tell them you will request permission to bump those projects aside so you can finish theirs. Almost always, they will tell you to keep working on their project, rather than seek permission to change the order of your work.

One thing I've noticed is that very rarely will a client ask what they can do to help you. But, if they call you while you're at a funeral home, do not make the same mistake I did and suggest they bring the file to you because you foolishly left it at the office. They did. On the other hand, if there is some task that they can do, ask. You may be surprised. Delegate tasks that you feel they can actually do and that will actually help you. I.E. type an order form; call the vendor to find out where a quote is or get specifics on pricing or products; or make photocopies of documents, contracts, whatever requires mass copying, stapling, sorting, etc. A word of caution: make it a simple task that won't take you too much time to fix, as inevitably it may need to be redone. This of course takes more time.

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Keep a paper trail

Use email regularly to remind clients to provide you with documents, information, and other items that you need to move the project forward. Phone calls are a great way to reach out and touch someone, but unless someone writes the information down, you're sunk. We're all too busy multi-tasking to remember everything that we hear, particularly on the phone. If you don't believe me, ask the clerk at the grocery store if they remember what you purchased last time you were in the store.

The reverse side of this method is that you either record requests that you receive by phone or in person with your handwritten notes to the file, including dates and times, or send an email to your client to confirm the details of the action item or request. If you ever have to demonstrate to either your client, or to your supervisor, why something was done (or not done) you will be able to produce the information easily. This is particularly satisfying when you can demonstrate that the vendor rep has failed to provide you with information.

And finally, smile. It will put a smile in your voice when you're on the phone, and it will make others wonder what you're up to, or what you know that they don't.

Maxelerate's goal is to help Sourcing, Procurement, Purchasing, Engineering, IT and other professionals in all industries and government agencies to get better deals from suppliers. We accomplish this by providing Consulting, Training, Seminars and Leadership Implementation.

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