

Episode 78: Overcoming Client Objections So They Hire You—with Deb Zahn

Deb Zahn: I want to welcome you to this week's episode of the Craft of Consulting podcast. So this week it's just going to be me. I'm going to talk about something that I have coached a lot of consultants about and, that is, what do you do when you send a proposal at a client's request over to them and instead of them just signing it and saying, "Yeah, this is great. This is what we talked about," they have objections. Or they want to negotiate elements of it. Or there's things that they just don't like, and they want to clarify. How do you handle that? And handle it in such a way that you get more engagements than not when those situations arise? So I want to talk about that today.

And it's a typical scenario, by the way. So you meet with a prospective client. It goes really well. You've talked about what a potential engagement would look like. You've worked out as many details as you can. They ask for a proposal. You send it. And just like I said, they don't say yes. And usually, the types of things that they want to either negotiate or clarify, or they want to poke at with a stick, is things related to price. Price is one of the most common ones. It could be the scope. It could be particular elements of the engagement itself. It could be the contract terms of conditions. It could be a whole host of things. It could be when you start and when you end. What the timeframe is. There could be a whole bunch of different things that come up. And again, I want to talk about what you can do when that does happen.

And the first thing I would say is, before you take any action or you say anything, you've got to get your mindset in the right place. Because again, as I've said in other episodes, and I say any time I mentioned the word mindset, the reason that it's so important is it drives action. It drives your choices. So if your mindset is not in the right place, you may end up doing things that ultimately you don't want to do, like lowering your price or negotiating for things that you really don't want to do or that you know aren't going to achieve the outcomes.

So you got to get your mind in the right place first. And there's two things I want to focus on that are mindset-related. The first is having the right expectations. So if you've never had this happen to you, or you only had it happen to you once, it can be a big surprise. And my mindset adjustment I want to suggest to you is to not be surprised because it's not unusual. It happens all the time to really successful consultants. And it happens even if you think that you've actually clarified all of the details of the engagement. It still can happen, and you shouldn't feel bad. And it doesn't mean no.

And I'm telling you this from experience because I've had it happen a lot to me. I had it happen to me last week, where there was a particular element of a proposal that the client wanted to be different. It was something that I actually could not, would not do. And so we had to figure that out together. And guess what? It all worked out. And I was pretty sure it was going to work out, but it happens all the time. So don't expect everything to be smooth sailing when you're giving folks a proposal because it isn't always.

And this is an internal skill. So the things you have to do inside, which I'm going to talk about in a moment. But a negotiating skill that you need to learn to develop because it's a normal part of the business of consulting. And if you develop it, you're ultimately going to get more business. That's why. Expect it. Prepare for it. Plan for it. Get really good at handling it, and you'll get more business.

So the other piece of mindset, and this is probably the trickiest one, is you have to know and embrace your own value. So when a prospective client comes back and they object or just plain don't like

something that you put in a proposal, or they want to revisit some aspect of it, it can feel bad, right? Your confidence can take a hit. Even though this is normal and this is expected, you might think it's you. And you might think that what you offered wasn't valuable. And here's the thing, again, as I said with mindset, the trouble is if you have not embraced your value and you haven't embraced the value of what you put in front of them, then you might do things that you otherwise wouldn't do.

So this is, again, one of the places where you may lower your price because price is a very typical objection. And if they say, "Oh, the price is too high," or, "Is there a way to lower your rates?" you might default to immediately doing that, even though I would argue, most of the time, that's not the right thing to do. I always negotiate scope. I don't negotiate price. But it might cause you to do something like that. Or again, you might say yes to everything they say, even though you know those aren't the right things to do or even though you know that that's not going to get them the result that they want.

So you have to embrace the value of what you put in front of them. So if you truly, truly, truly put forward a proposal that you know is going to produce the result that they want and that it matches the value of that result to them, then own that. And if you own that, it's going to be easier to negotiate. That doesn't mean that you just put up this impenetrable wall and everything they want, you say no to. But what it means is that you're starting from a good place of understanding the value of what you're bringing to the table and what that value is to them. And now negotiation is based on the particulars of how that value gets delivered. And that's really helpful when you're in these situations.

Now if there are some things you think, "Oh, OK, well, yeah, I see what they're saying. There's a way to do this a little bit better," that's OK too because part of being a consultant is a learning experience. So you're going to learn every time how to do things a little bit better, but don't immediately default to the assumption that what you put in front of them is not valuable. Because often, if we're really honest with ourselves, we know that when we say that, what we really mean is we're talking about ourselves and it's really about a feeling of low self-worth. And out of our low self-worth comes something we put in front of a client that is invaluable. So you got to interrupt that mindset and replace it with a mindset where you truly embrace your value.

So if you do that part...And I don't mean to say that flippantly because that's a really hard part, but you can get better at it the more you do it. The more you practice being able to do that. But let's talk about how to handle these situations because there are lots of different things that could come up and you might handle them in different ways.

But I want to talk about preventing them because the best thing is always to prevent them from coming up. And the truth is, if you really think about your conversation that you had with a prospective client, you could probably anticipate objections or things that they might want to negotiate. You could probably figure out what those are before you put the proposal together. Things that came up in the meeting. Things that you know about them. Things that you've seen before. And so the key to preventing them is, one, to anticipate, and two, to get out ahead of it. So bake language into your proposal that helps them get past those.

In fact, even before that, when you're meeting with them and they bring up some of those or you asked questions to help them bring up some of those, or you get even an inkling that they're having some hesitation, you can address them right away. You can make a case for why it is that they should be

working with you and they should be working with you in the way that you're talking about it. And so that could prevent a lot of the objections from coming up after you deliver the proposal.

So let me give you an example. So if you know, or you get a sense when you're in the meeting, that they're price sensitive. That there really is an issue related to the price or they've expressed any concerns about that. Or you just get a sense. Usually, you can tell when that's going to come up. And I would say, what I'm about to tell you, you should do even if they aren't price-sensitive but you want to make sure that when you're talking to them and then in your proposal, that the value of what you will do for them is glaringly obvious. So don't make them try and do your calculations of value. Do that for them and make sure that they understand how what you're going to do is related to the value of the outcome that they want to achieve. And articulate that for them. And I always like to say...Actually, I stole this from my husband. So I have to say it came from him, is never let anybody do your cost-benefit analysis. You always do it for them. So you really want to make sure that they understand the benefit of what they're going to get relative to the cost. And you can anticipate that. You can talk about it when you're meeting with them. And you can also make sure that some of that language gets baked into your proposal. So you're essentially also making a case for why working with you under the terms that you've indicated in the proposal makes a heck of a lot of sense.

Now, you also could do things in the proposal if you truly believe that their price sensitivities are based on their reality of what the situation that they're in, you could also give them some options. So this is where offering three tiers of value, each at a different price point, might be helpful to them because then they could think about what they're willing to pay relative to the value that they could get from you. Now that's an approach that I think is generally magic. I think it works really well to help try and maximize the value that you can deliver to clients. But it's also a way to address that objection that they might have related to price. And it gives them an opportunity to make choices based on their unique circumstances.

If there's an approach that you know is the right way to go about helping them get their results and you think that they might not be used to it or they might have some objections or questions about it, don't make them figure it out. Make the case for it before they raise it. If it's something that they've never seen before and/or it's something that is brand new and cutting edge and that's not really who they are, whatever the reason is, make the case for them. Take them from what you're suggesting all the way to the yes. So that, again, they're not doing the cost-benefit analysis. You're doing that for them.

And so that's the prevention part of it. And truthfully, the better you get at doing that, the fewer objections or questions you're going to have later on. And that's what I found. It doesn't mean they all go away. But you'll have fewer.

So if you do all of that and they still raise objections or they still have questions or they still have things that they want to negotiate, I want you to remember that you have two main goals as you start to enter into this negotiation with them. The first is you want them to know because you are showing them, that you care more about them than closing the deal. And the second thing is you want them to understand that you get them and you get their circumstances. Right? So both of those are really related, which is you understand them and you care about them. And that's critical because building a robust consulting business is based on not just the quantity of your relationships, but the quality of your relationships. And so you want them to feel that no matter what.

And I've actually, because I show so much care for them...there were some circumstances where I was talking with a prospective client. And as we engaged in the negotiation, it became really clear that they needed something different than what I could give them. In which case, I helped them find what they really need, and that was with a different consultant. That's how much I was showing that I cared about them. And then, by the way, they came back later when they truly did need me, and we had a great relationship based on that.

So I want to get into some specifics about what happens if they do this? What happens if they say this? Because there are some things that just come up over and over and over again. And I want to talk about, from a script perspective, how you can handle it.

So when a prospective client just plain says they do not like something that you proposed. And by the way, that could be something that you actually discussed in the meeting. And maybe they went back. They talked to others about it. They thought about it more. But for whatever reason, they just don't like it.

I always suggest that one of the first things you say is something like this. "I'm happy to talk about what you didn't like and revise the proposal. Tell me more about what you'd like to see in the proposal." So your first statement is showing that you care about them and you care about what they want. And your second is trying to gain a deeper understanding of them and their circumstances and what they do want. That usually sets things off on a really good setting, right? So when they're done and they're talking about going back and forth with what they truly want, you can say, "Thank you. That's helpful. I can revise the proposal to reflect that."

Or if you think, "Now I get what they're trying to do," and you think there's a better way to do it, you can bring that up. But you want to ask clarifying questions so that you get a thorough understanding of how to change the proposal. And then at the end of it, again, thank them. Tell them you'll make changes to it and then get it to them as quickly as possible. So if they have objections to something you propose...I'm going to go back because I just mentioned this a moment ago...That you think is important or critical to the success of the engagement, maybe they want to get rid of something and you're like, "No, that is absolutely critical to making this happen," or they want to do something in a different way that you know is not going to be effective. I usually say something like, "Let me clarify why I put that in the proposal." And then I explain why it is that I did that.

It gives me an opportunity to display my knowledge and skills and my expertise. But I really will push back on that because, ultimately, they're paying you for results and you want to make sure that they actually achieve it. So it is important, I think, in those moments, to push back. If you truly really know that they're not going to get the results if they do what they're trying to do, or there will be collateral damage if they do it that way.

Now, if they have objections to the price, again, that's the one that happens quite a bit, right? I usually say something like, "I know the budget is important to you. I can certainly change the scope to get to the price you want." Now, again, that's where I will negotiate scope. I won't negotiate price. It doesn't mean I never discount. There are situations where I do that. But that's where then they have to understand: the price is the price. "But if you want more for what you're willing to pay, then we can adjust the scope to make that happen."

And this is when I want to talk about and ask clarifying questions to get very specific about what that new scope could be. I want to give them options and I want to throw out that whole thing. Emphasize the value that they're going to get. So I want to tell them clearly what outcomes or results they can get for that price. So if it's a little bit less than what they originally hoped for, I need to clarify that because if I set up the wrong expectation and I get this engagement, they're going to expect what we talked about. And if I can't do it for that price, either I'm going to set up a really uncomfortable conversation with them that I'm eventually going to have to have, or if I'm going to eat those extra costs. Now I've lost money. There's no reason to do that as long as you're upfront.

Now, if they push for the same scope for a lower price, usually I will say something like this. "My goal is to make sure that you get the outcomes you need. I can propose a scope and price to do that. I can also identify any trade-offs or things that might occur because you want a different scope and that'll help give you the information you need to make a decision." So that's where I'm saying to them: basically, the price is the price. I can help meet your budget goals but there's going to be trade-offs. I'm going to make those clear to you so that you can actually make choices. And then when I propose something back to them, I am really clear about what those trade-offs are. So again, no surprises later. Because those are bad surprises and you never want to do that in a client engagement. And then I want to emphasize the value they get.

But no matter what, in my responses, I always tie the scope and the price together. Now, if they start coming at me about "price, price, price," as if to suggest that that price for that scope is way too high, I actually switch the language and I no longer refer to it as a price and I now refer to it as their budget. That's an important signal back to them because it's saying you understand that they have budget limitations that they need to work within, but now you're not accepting that you're going to haggle over the price itself. You're going to talk about how to get them what they need and what they most want within their budget. And I have found that actually to be really successful. And this is another place where you can talk about tiers of value. Where you change the value. They get the scope they get and the price they get so that they can make decisions within that. But you don't say, "Oh, OK. I'll just lower my price." And again, that's why it's so important for you to embrace your value so that you don't ultimately do that.

Now this is a little rarer, but it does happen. So if they don't think that either you, or if you've put a team together to work with them, if they don't think that you or those folks have the right skills or expertise to do what they propose. Then you can say...And I've had that happen. Generally, I've had that happen when I've put together teams...Is, "Let's talk about what the engagement requires, and then we can decide if we need to make any changes."

So here's what I think is needed. And then articulate to them what you think is needed for the things that they're trying to achieve. And you identify those key skills and expertise. It could just be that they don't know that those are actually the right people. Or it could be that they're actually not the right people because they haven't told you enough. In which case, if you ask clarifying questions, you're going to get to that.

Now, if you go through all of that and you still believe that your team is the right team. Or you're still a fit, you could be willing to walk away from it, which I have done. Also at the front end, I never propose anything to anybody that I truly know that I can't do a good job. So that helps prevent it in the first place. But that doesn't always mean that they know that, they embrace that. But I think if you're going

to switch up who you bring around you in a team, which I've definitely done...I'll say things like, "Based on what is needed for the engagement, I still think I'm a fit or they're a fit." Or, "I think if we make these changes, it's going to hit exactly what you need." And then you can demonstrate that and give brief examples of why. So I have found that to be a really successful way to handle that.

So the other thing is often they may want to clarify something you've proposed. Now, when they ask for clarification, sometimes it's as simple as, "Oh, OK. Yeah, I get it," and then they sign it and everything's good. Sometimes that clarifying process leads to further negotiation. So generally if they ask for clarification, I will say, "I'm happy to clarify anything you need in the proposal. What do you need me to clarify?" And then I ask for the details so that I understand it enough to know if what I'm proposing has to change. I need to have a thorough understanding of that. If at the end of the conversation, there are changes that are needed, I make sure I vocalize those out loud and I say, "Does that sound right?" Usually it does. Sometimes they're like, "Oh no, no. Here's what else I'm thinking." So you really want to nail that down.

Now let's say you have a prospective client that wants to just negotiate what you've proposed. Right? So they just want to negotiate it. I say, "I'm happy to talk about anything in the proposal. What part of the proposal would you like to talk about?" Because sometimes they don't always know what they want to negotiate about. So I really want to hone in on what that is so that I can adjust what I'm saying.

Now, notice I'm very specific. I say, "I'm happy to talk about anything in the proposal." I am not saying I am willing to negotiate anything or change anything in the proposal because again, I'm not going to change my price unless my scope changes. So I want to signal to them that it's an open conversation, but I don't want that to signal to them that I'm willing to change anything that they want because generally, if I'm willing to change anything that they want, then I have a mindset problem. That's usually not an engagement problem. That's something that's going on inside of me.

Now, if they want changes to the scope, and again, that's often one that they want, I will say, "Let's go through the parts of the scope that you want to discuss, and then see if the changes align with what you ultimately want your outcome to be." And I signal that because often a client may want changes, or if there's a group of folks talking, some people might want changes, but they haven't necessarily thought through what the impact on the results they want to achieve are. And so I want to signal early on that I think that is important and that's part of what our conversation is going to be. And then of course ask all the clarifying questions to make sure that you have a thorough understanding of what they need. So if they want the timeline to be different or something like that, you're really clear about why, and they're really clear about what ultimately that's going to mean.

So the other thing is...And this is where I want to highlight the timeline because this is often one that I see has to be negotiated often. Not all the time, but a lot of clients want good things to happen much faster. So if they want to make changes to the timeline and you know that it will make it either difficult or darn near impossible for you to be able to help them achieve their outcomes, do not agree to those changes. And I would say the same thing about the scope. You can try and get them to make a better choice. And I usually will say something like, "I have to be honest. I don't think that you can achieve what you want to achieve in that timeline. Let me suggest a few alternatives that are closer to what you are suggesting but will still get you where you want to go."

And so, again, I'm showing flexibility because I do want to think of some alternatives. I also want to dig in a little bit and see if the urgency that they are expressing is real urgency or that's perceived or emotional urgency. But I also want to be flexible and show them that I'm willing to think through it. But I am a hundred percent not willing to do something that is not possible. And then at the end, again, anything that is changed, you want to clarify at the end and you want to say, "This is what I'm understanding. Does that sound right?" And then you want to get them back the proposal as soon as possible.

So the last thing that I want to say is when to stop negotiating. So I'm going to date myself by telling you this. But if anybody remembers the Kenny Rogers song *The Gambler*, it has this great line where he's talking about what happens when you're sitting at the gambling table. And one of the lines that I love is "You got to know when to walk away and know when to run." It is the same way when you are negotiating engagements with clients. There are times that you should walk away and there are definitely times you should run away.

So if the negotiations are going in circles and it looks like the prospective client really just doesn't know what they want, or there's too many top chefs in the kitchen and they all don't agree on what the priorities are. What you're trying to achieve. What the actual results they to achieve are. You want to nip that in the bud quickly because one, that takes a whole lot of time, and that could be time that is better spent for building your business. But also if you start working with them to help them clarify that, that's valuable and you should actually be paid for it.

So what I've done, and I've actually encountered this a number of times is I will say, "All right, folks. It sounds like the most important thing that needs to happen here is for you all to come to an agreement on what you're trying to achieve and the parameters that are going to be critical to you." Or whatever it is that they can't seem to come to an agreement on. And then I will suggest an initial smaller engagement where what I'm going to do with them is to help them nail down what they want. And so essentially I'm going to help them nail down the scope of what they want me to do for them. But in doing that, and this is how I do it, even if they never choose to work with me, what I've done for them is valuable and so I want to make sure that I get paid for that because it's valuable as a standalone.

Now it is possible that you could be negotiating, and for some reason, you see that they are not doing this in good faith, or they're displaying poor behavior. Then guess what? It's not worth working with them. So if you can, that's when you want to walk away. Or if it's really bad, you want to run away because this is my line, it's truth in advertising. It's what you see is what you get. And usually, if the behavior changes, it only changes for the worse. Now that, in my decade-long of consulting, has rarely happened. It has happened a few times, and I will tell you, there have been a couple of times that I overrode it and I'm like, "Oh no. I'm sure it'll be great once we start working together." Well, no, it wasn't. I overrode it and I wished that I had not. So trust yourself. Don't override what you're seeing. And if you need to walk away or you need to run, turn on the Kenny Rogers song. Sing it out loud and be willing to do it.

So that's generally what I want to say about objections and negotiating. And again, I want to reiterate that this is a normal part of the business of consulting. So the more you can get your mindset in the right place so that you then will take the right actions, and the more that you can learn these skills, you are ultimately going to get more business. I have had more yeses than I've had nos. By a lot. When I negotiate and have these conversations and show up as my best self and understand my value, I end up

getting a heck of a lot more business than the occasional no I get when I start to do this type of negotiation.

So the other thing I wanted to add is if you need help, and you need quick help, in figuring out what your path and your plan is going to be to get consulting clients, then I'm going to be holding a special event. So it's going to be a virtual intensive retreat. It starts on the evening of October 23rd. It goes through the weekend. I promise there'll be lots of breaks. I promise it'll be a ton of fun. And in that, we're going to get you ready to get consulting clients really fast.

We're going to go over a number of mindset issues that are going to help you get out of your own way so that you can get more clients. We're going to nail down what your initial market, your niche, and your service offerings are and how you're going to deliver those. Or they're going to dive into the nitty-gritty of how you actually get clients. So we're going to help you prioritize what type of marketing and outreaches you should be using that are going to have a higher yield. We're going to talk about how to get in front of prospective clients. And then when you do, how to wow them. Get them to ask you for a proposal. And then ultimately figure out how to close the deal. Objections will be one of the things that we're going to be working with together.

And then we're going to talk about how to take the business you do get, or that you already have, and leverage that so that you ultimately get more business. This is going to create an action plan for you to get clients. You're going to know exactly what you're going to do when you walk out the door. Who you're going to outreach to. What specifically you're going to do with them to try and get business. And then ultimately construct a six-month plan so that you can really start to build up your pipeline.

It's going to be great. It's only going to be a handful of other consultants because I want us to really work together closely. And then the cool thing is, after the retreat, you also get to send me two videos. And in those videos, you can ask questions. You can describe some tricky situation or problem you're trying to solve, and I will send you back personalized coaching through a video. There are other cool things about it too. So you also get lifetime access to my online course, Get More Consulting Business Faster. That's got even more, not just content and instruction, but also a ton of tools that you can use immediately to start getting business. So for example, one of the things we're going to talk about is to reach out to your existing network and try and get them to give you access to their network. And I have an email sequence that all you have to do is put in your information and boom, you've got everything you need to start doing things like that.

Also, when I do have an online community, which I'm going to kick off in 2021, this is going to be a private where you can get on and ask questions. Get help solving problems. Network with others. Get support from me. That's going to kick off in 2021 and you're going to have free access to that for the first six months. So you get a whole lot of goodies by being part of this retreat. So if you look in the show notes and you look on the podcast page on craftofconsulting.com, you'll find a link.

You can check out what the retreat's going to be about, or better still, schedule a call with me and we'll talk and we'll figure out where you are. What your problems are that you're trying to solve. What's been getting in your way. And if the retreat's right for you then we'll talk about it. If the retreat's not right for you, that's OK too. I can give you some guidance. And I won't be able to resist; I'll definitely give you free advice. But that's the best thing to do is just schedule a call with me. See if it's right for you. If it's not

right for you, I'll absolutely tell you that and I'll point you in a direction of where you can actually get what you need.

So that's what I wanted to share with you. It's going to be a ton of fun. There's going to be a lot of hard work but there's going to be lots of laughter and there's going to be a lot of camaraderie because I'm being very careful with who is going to be part of that retreat to make sure that we all click and we can all support each other. So check it out. Hopefully you'll be able to find the information you need, and no matter what, schedule a call with me and let's chat. Hopefully this was really helpful. And I will be back on the next episode. Thanks so much.

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of the Craft of Consulting Podcast. I want to ask you to do actually three things. If you enjoyed this episode or if you've enjoyed any of my other ones, hit subscribe. I got a lot of other great guests that are coming up and a lot of other great content and I don't want you to miss anything. But the other two things that I'm going to ask you to do is, one is, if you have any comments, so if you have any suggestions or any kind of feedback that will help make this podcast more helpful to more listeners, please include those.

And then the last thing is, again, if you've gotten something out of this, share it, share it with somebody you know who's a consultant or thinking about being a consultant, and make sure that they also have access to all this great content and all the other great content that's going to be coming up.

So as always, you can go and get more wonderful information and tools at craftofconsulting.com. Thanks so much. I will talk to you on the next episode. Bye-bye.