

Four Behaviours That Can Tank Relationships Between IT Buyers And Sellers

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[Blog entry](#)

Ask a Chinese chef what he means by baking, boiling, broiling, frying and grilling, and he'll tell you that they are cooking processes used in Chinese cuisine.

Now ask a Chinese military general the same question, and he'll tell you that they are ancient Chinese execution methods.

I mention this rather exciting factoid because this is the exact problem when two IT business owners look at the phrase "business development".

For one, business development is savvy marketing. It's the systematic development of magnetic attraction to acquire the cream of the crop of a specific target market and then develop the relationship to repeat and referral business.

For the other, business development is forced selling. It's a maniacal pursuit of any segment of any market with wallet and pulse beat. Catch them, wrestle them to the ground and take their money while they're screaming "NOOOOO!"

I've recently read John Gottman's brilliant book, *Why Marriages Succeed Or Fail*, and he talks about Four Horsemen, four specific behaviours that can guarantee to ruin marriages pretty quickly and pretty effectively, that is, most often beyond repair.

And if you ask why a single guy reads about why marriages fail, I don't even have a good answer for you. But considering that one day I may get married, I would want to know what mistakes to avoid making... knowing that I will make some anyway.

As I was reading the book, I realised, that good buyer-seller relationships revolve around more or less the same dynamics as good marriages (all right, except kisses, sex and some other minute details), and just as the Four Horsemen can destroy marriages, the same Four Horsemen can also destroy relationships between buyers and IT sellers.

So, this article is about the Four Horsemen as I believe they apply to privately owned IT companies, solo IT professionals and their clients.

The Four Horsemen, the four destructive behaviours usually come together, so they can inflict combined damage on relationships. Sometimes they are brought in by sellers, sometimes by buyers, but since it takes two to tango, it's a joint effort.

But regardless of which party brings them in, if the other person knows how to recognise these behaviours, they may be able to salvage the relationship, and after ironing out the kinks, they can move towards a bright and prosperous future together.

What these four behaviours have in common is that they make a pig's ear of your communication, the other people shut down, and you end up with the proverbial equivalent of praying to a horse. It will be a one-way process without any result, except your boring the horse into deep sleep or even premature death. And then PETA¹ kicks you in the shins rather harshly.

To demonstrate each of the Four Horseman better, we'll look at the relationship between an IT

¹ People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals: www.peta.org

professional, Webster Sponpule and his client Fred Cringingnuts.

First Horseman: Criticism

Criticism is usually the result of complaints that haven't been responded to. So, if I complain to a client that...

**"I feel pissed off by your being late from every single meeting"
(specific and factual)**

...This complaint can easily escalate to criticism along these lines...

"You're just an unreliable flake, a blazing idiot, a second rate punk."

(general and vague)

Some Considerations

- In what situations do you resort to criticising others?
- Do you have a specific client(s) with whom you interact in a criticising way?
- What's your reward in criticising?
- Who did you learn to criticise from? Someone from your childhood? A former co-colleague?

The other difference is that complaints don't spell out what we see as the problem. Yes, they are fairly specific, but specific about complainers' feelings, their current reality, not about the other person's behaviour complainers don't like. The advantage is that complaints are pretty specific. They specify how they feel and specifically because of what.

Criticism, although they address the cause, are pretty vague. The criticised person actually receives a personal attack from the criticiser, to which the straight response is another Horseman, defensiveness.

Soon after having started working together, Webster started complaining about Fred's constant lateness from meetings. He would say...

"Fred, I feel disrespected when you're late, and I also feel that you treat this project as a back-burner item."

So, there is nothing damaging here, since Webster only expressed his own feelings about Fred's constant lateness (not Fred himself). But then this complaint can escalate into criticism in the form of...

"Fred, you're a bloody flake, an unreliable goon and a double-talking moron."

Now this is personal attack. It doesn't specify what Webster's perceived problem is with Fred. It's just a judgement statement on Fred as a person. It's the same as walking on the street and randomly calling people idiots just because the criticiser perceives them to be idiots.

And here is an interesting thing. If you catch yourself criticising others, then you just have to pull

back a bit into complaints mode, which is a healthy part of any relationship. Remember, complaining is just naming your feelings, which is not about the other person but about you. And after naming your feelings, together you can start working on it. And having worked out the reason of the complaint in an honest discussion, the relationship is likely to get even better than before. But you have to be very careful here to make sure the complaint remains a complaint, and doesn't turn into criticism.

So, make sure whatever you say, make it about yourself...

"Your constant lateness (a fact) makes me believe that this project is not important for you. Can we talk about it?"

The other kind of criticism can be lots of complaints lumped together...

"You said you would review the business plan and also that you send me a cheque for \$45,500. And they haven't happened. Is there at least one single reliable cell in your whole bloody body, or are you 100% flake and a notorious liar?"

And when criticism reaches a certain level in a relationship, it leads right to the...

Second Horseman: Contempt

When respect disappears from a relationship, and when criticism fails, then you're likely to land in the welcoming open arms of contempt. You can recognise contempt by covert hostility and name-calling.

Some Considerations

- How often do you express respect for your clients? Do they receive this respect?
- Can you receive respect from your clients?
- How are you connecting with your clients in positive ways? Any improvements?
- Are there any situations when you or your clients land in the contempt trap?

With time, the tension between IT practitioner Webster Sponpule and client Fred Cringingnuts has got worse. Webster felt plain downright disgusted with Fred, who kept failing on his commitments and accountabilities. So Webster's question is...

"Fred, how can you be so irresponsible?"

And to that Fred's response is along the lines of...

"Oh, Webster, you just don't understand my situation, and try to make me dance to the beat of your drum. I don't even know why I hired you in the first place. I've already forgotten more of this stuff than you'll ever learn. I really don't need you."

Now here we're talking about some heavy-duty contempt.

What makes contempt worse than criticism is that it is meant to insult and abuse the other

person. It includes both words and extensive body language, and the subject of the attack is the other person's deepest sense of being. So instead of saying...

"Webster's stupid idea."

People often say...

"Stupid Webster's idea."

Do you feel the difference?

The former forms an opinion on the idea. The latter forms an opinion on the person who put the idea forward. Huge difference.

What happens here is that the parties ignore why they started working together, and now they are in a constant and - probably - never-ending shit-sliding mode.

As contempt is becoming more and more wide-spread in the practitioner-client relationship, positive qualities of the relationships and achievements get quickly forgotten.

Several years ago when a client of mine achieved 27% increase in monthly sales after only 45 days of working together, I showed up with a bottle of wine for a little celebration after our session. The client looked at me, and said angrily...

"Instead of this stupid celebration stuff, you'd better just get on with the work I pay you for and stop wasting my time."

Thanks to my military training, I don't get easily intimidated, but I was a bit taken aback, I must admit. The guy kept falling behind on his own commitments and accountabilities in our agreement, but instead of making commitments for getting his end of the work done, he kept focusing on how I could work more quickly, more effectively and take on some of his work which he just "didn't have time for." It was bizarre.

At one point he even suggested that I should fire all my clients and work for him full-time.

He was fully booked, so he spent all his time working IN his business, and had no time left to work ON it. Basically he expected me to work ON the business, grow it FOR him, and hand over the money.

So, how do you recognise contempt? Watch for insults and name-calling, hostile humour, mockery and negative body language (sneering, rolling eyes, curling upper lip, etc.).

The best way to handle the situation is by instantly firing the client. This is dead-and-gone relationship which is a pain in the arse for all people involved.

If firing the client sounds too radical, then you can approach the relationships with a specific complaint which voices your feelings about the specific behaviour.

"I feel disrespected when you're late, and I also feel that you treat this project as a back-burner item."

Note that you're not talking about the person, but about your own feelings (of being disrespected) when triggered by a certain behaviour (lateness). And you're entitled to your feelings.

Third Horseman: Defensiveness

After criticism and contempt have become wide-spread in their relationship, Webster and Fred's project takes a major hit. The major hit is the response to criticism and contempt. As we know, it takes two to tango, so if one partner in the dance is criticism and contempt, the other partner is defensiveness.

Some Considerations

- What are your favourite forms of defensiveness? Denying responsibility, making excuses, disagreeing with others for the hell of it, saying “yes but” or repeating yourself?
- What situations have ever triggered you into defensiveness?
- What's your reward for being defensive?
- Do you remember where, when and from whom you've learnt to be defensive? What was that person like?

Defensiveness takes place when one partner criticises the other, and defensiveness is the other partner's natural response. But being defensive just adds to the already towering problems. Here are some of the common signs of defensiveness.

Denying responsibility: Whatever the other party says, you - like a broken record - keep saying the same thing: “It's not me! It's not me!”

Excuse-mongering: You keep blaming external circumstances for your situation...

Assuming negative comments: You assume negative comments to come from the other person, and you pre-empt it: “I know you believe it's a waste of time” or “I know you will hate it.” These assumptions are always negative.

Cross-complaining: You respond to the other person's complaint with your own...

“Oh, that's noting. If you knew what's happening around me, you would stop complaining.”

Repetition: Instead of listening and understanding the other party, you just keep repeating your point of view. In the meantime both partners believe they are right and try to understand the other person...

“As I've said before many times, I don't pay you a penny until and unless complete finish the project for me.”

The best way of breaking out of this vicious defensive circle is by stopping regarding your partner as an attacker. However hard it can be (yes, it is hard), try to empathise with your partner. Since by now your partner expects you to be defensive, if you start really listening, you catch your partner off guard in a positive way. Yes, for a while your partner will continue the old, habitual behaviour, but by becoming an exemplar you lead both of you out of this crappy situation. Your partner will follow your lead. Remember, the phrase “monkey see, monkey do”. Considering that a few years ago we all started out as monkeys, the phrase applies to us too.

Forth Horseman: Stonewalling

If nothing else helps, stonewalling is certainly a neat way of ending a conversation. You are guaranteed to stop your conversation with the same abruptness as if you had a concrete wall fall on you and flatten you into the ground. Sadly though, for many men this is the only tool for a safe haven when they don't know what to do. So, stonewalling becomes a walk-away policy. They just walk away from situations, leaving the other person to stew in his/her own juices of fury and frustration.

Some Considerations

- What's your toleration level to stonewalling?
- What's your typical response to stonewalling?
- Do you remember when and where you first witnessed some major-league stonewalling?

By now Webster has attacked Fred so many times and so vehemently about his lack of accountability and overall flakiness, that Fred just decided to stonewall Webster and walk away. The relationship started with poor communication and ended up in no communication. Now Fred doesn't even respond to Webster's comments. And in doing so, Webster too gets worked up because being ignored is probably worse and more painful than having hot iron shoved up his arse.

Stonewalling can also happen while partners try to sort things out. In that case stonewalling is just temporary, and the person sometimes flings back into normal listening mode. But even in listening mode, the response is nothing more than, "Uh huh", "Hmmm" or "yeah".

Stonewallers don't even know what they are "communicating" this way. Stonewalling expresses both disapproval, distance from the other person and a certain level of arrogance. Usually women are much more sensitive to stonewalling.

Although stonewalling may seem like the end of the relationship between practitioners and their clients, with some attention the relationship can be saved. Although personally I prefer to treat it as the end of the relationship. There are lots of great clients out there, so I don't see the reason to struggle on with clients who stonewall me in any way. So...

What To Do To Improve Relationships Between Clients And Sellers?

First you have to calm yourself, understanding that other people's behaviour towards you is more about them than about you. They simply act out their own emotional shit on the same stage which you stand on, and throw it into your face because you happen to be around. If you're not there, they kick the dog, the cat or hell knows what else.

Also, we have to pay attention to physiological signs, like elevated heart rate. Physiological changes usually bring emotional changes.

So, now we're back to becoming an exemplar. If you have a defensive client, and you become non-defensive, there is a very good chance that your client becomes non-defensive too, and you

can start communicating again.

If you let your clients know that you understand them and you actually demonstrate this understanding, the quality of your relationship is likely to improve. In my experience even if someone uses contempt, criticism and stonewalling on you, if you don't become defensive in your response, then you can salvage the situation, and have a good chance to change the other person's behaviour.

So, how can we make - fairly - sure that we keep the Four Horsemen out of our relationships? My preferred way is to draft a “Code Of Honour” or “Rules Of The Game” that describes how we deal with certain behaviours. It includes points like...

- Being on time for meetings
- Openly discussing dissatisfaction
- Accepting feedback without becoming defensive
- Absolutely no shouting and abusive language
- Resolving tension between people within 24 hours

So, read the Four Horsemen again and think about how some of them may play out in your own life with some of your clients. Write down each troubled relationship and then design a course of remedy for each client. If there is no remedy or the remedy is too problematic, you may be best off to abandon some clients.

Remember, bad business is worse than no business.

In the meantime, don't sell harder. Market smarter and your business will be better off for it.

About The Author



Since 1998, after a 16-year industrial stint as an electronics/computer engineer, project manager and technical buyer, Tom “Bald Dog” Varjan has been working with privately held information technology companies and independent IT professionals to market and sell their complex, high-ticket and hard-to-explain IT solutions to high-end, sophisticated clients. For Tom's free white paper, “More Brain Less Brawn: High-Leverage Client Acquisition Strategies For Privately Held IT Companies In The Knowledge-Based Economy”, go to <http://www.varjan.com>

Additional Knowledge Products to Build Your IT Business

Here are some knowledge products on business development for building your premium-calibre IT business. It's especially for privately held "entrepreneurial" IT companies and solo IT professionals.

These products are sort of workbooks. They explain what is what, then walk you through the "how to..." part of the process. As you read the books, you do the exercises, and by the time you finish reading, all the relevant bits and bobs are in front of you on paper applied to your own unique situation. For this reason, the materials are not long but rather dense.

I hope you find them valuable.

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