

## DR04: Your Client's Comfort Zone: Find it and keep your project within it!

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We know, but tend to forget, that a new project can be one of the biggest investments a private-sector client will ever make. We know, but tend to forget, that a new public-sector project involves a range of political issues that can carry big and diverse risks.

Particularly in the seller-doer model that is a hallmark of many successful design firms, you are often the Principal leading the charge to win the project and then (sometimes rather quickly) you are the Project Manager responsible for executing the work. Inherently in this model, we think about the client and their underlying needs and concerns extensively...until the project gets underway. Once a project gets moving, we tend to see clients as somebody performing their side of project realization: providing information, answering questions, approving designs, paying invoices, and otherwise staying out of the way.

Unfortunately, the name plays right into this reality – “PROJECT” Manager as opposed to “CLIENT” Manager – and building rich and lasting client relationships comes from never losing the “CLIENT” Manager mindset.

### The Client Comfort Zone

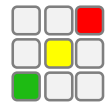
One sure-fire way to keep the client focus always at the forefront is establishing what I call the Client Comfort Zone. Think of this “zone” as a map of the client’s complex set of attitudes and fears about the project. The things they feel they can cope with and handle are inside the zone. The stuff they worry about and aren’t confident about is outside the zone.

Many clients, save for perhaps the most seasoned and sophisticated ones, come to projects with a lot of “baggage” – natural fear that the project will run over budget, not be finished on time, not be what they want, etc. Every client will consciously or unconsciously assign different values or importance to different fears in their set. Some may have concerns about site or soil conditions; it wouldn’t even occur to others. Others may worry about trouble from stakeholders and public opinion; others will simply assume that the lawyers will take care of it.

Much to do with these underlying fears is shoved into the background once the “go” decision is made - but these fears do NOT go away. Rather, they wait...lurking in the shadows, for some sign that the fears were justified. Further complicating things, for the most part, we don’t even know which fears are minor and which are major because generally clients don’t tell us about them unless we ask the right questions. In fact, they may not even be consciously aware of some of these fears; they simply have morphed over into “attitudes” such as “all architects just want our money so they can win design awards”. This attitude simply masks fears that the designers may not be adequate stewards of their hard-earned money.

### Finding the “Edges”

There is one simple way to find that out define the edges of the zone. That is, ask a lot of thoughtful questions as early in the project as possible. Once you have defined it, you will respond differently to issues inside versus outside that zone. Additionally, these edges will be different for every client, even within the same building type.



A common mistake in defining the edges of the zone is to think like a designer and not like a client. It is vital to really get inside your client's mind when gathering the information to define the zone. Remember that their fears will frequently not be obvious and may not even be intuitive.

## Never Stray From It

The Client Comfort Zone doesn't just come out at key project milestones or when things get sticky. From creating the Project Management Plan to managing construction change orders, the zone will always be relevant. By articulating and staying focused on the zone, you will demonstrate an appreciation of the client's position and mindset about the project and that you are focused on a project that a.) minimizes their discomfort, and b.) is more likely to achieve their goals.

If you can keep a project inside the client's Comfort Zone from start to finish, you will have one very happy client. In short, you are creating confidence in your approach to the project. From confidence comes trust and from trust comes a lasting client relationship!

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