

COOPERATIVE INTELLIGENCE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

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*“Give the world the best you have
and the best will come back to you.”*

– Madeline Bridge

The essence of relationship building is to recognize that it takes significant effort on your part. Relationships are built one person at a time. In my introductory article on cooperative intelligence in the January/February issue, I included a sidebar on “Cooperative Intelligence Practices and Attitudes,” as follows:

- Treat your clients with respect.
- Take a problem-solving attitude, but don't solve their problems.
- Identify the currencies of exchange with your contacts.
- Be a source for acknowledgment and appreciation.
- Maintain a positive attitude.
- Don't take yourself (or “them”) too seriously.
- Promote continual communication.

We will explore the first three points in more detail.

TREAT YOUR CLIENTS WITH RESPECT

Probably the easiest way to respect your clients is to put yourself in their place. If you want to influence them, you need to emphatically understand the power of their point of view and to feel the emotional force with which they believe it. This will help you understand the complexity of how they think: how they developed their questions, beliefs, ethics, and requests for competitive intelligence (CI).

Make an effort to craft the experiences you would want if you were

the client. Ask clients how they might approach what they're asking you for. This activity also engages them in the competitive intelligence task.

Do what you say you're going to do when you say you're going to do it. If you can't do something, communicate it as soon as you realize that you're not going to make the deadline. Respect is a two-way street: be punctual, honor commitments, and communicate that you expect your clients to honor their commitments.

In most companies, one group — sales — typically gets little respect. But if you treat salespeople with respect and recognize them in front of their peers, it is amazing how responsive they can be to your requests for competitive data. I have found that salespeople highly value being connected with others who are struggling with similar issues or against a certain competitor.

Listen generously. As your clients speak, learn to listen for their contribution as opposed to listening from your assessment, opinions, and judgments. Listening generously implies you are assuming positive intent, a willingness to be persuaded. An open mind receives new information without a rigidly predetermined bias. When you listen generously, your clients know they have been heard. They get this type of attention so rarely that you will gain credibility just from being a true listener.

You sure know when people don't listen. How often are you talking with people at a social gathering, such as SCIP's annual conference, and their eyes are shifting through the crowd the whole time you're talking? Then they see who they really want to talk to and excuse themselves. You feel very unimportant and somewhat snubbed.



Practice “A+ ness” — make sure everything you do is of the highest quality. That is why you don't say YES to everything. You need to qualify your competitive intelligence work closely so you can work smart. That is a personal value statement. In a similar vein, be ready for meetings. Don't just “show up,” even if you are not the one who is leading the meeting.

Make decisions that reflect a reverence for long-term relationships. Although you may be eager to finish what you're doing right now, invest the time with your clients to build and strengthen your relationship. So often we concentrate on meeting new people and take for granted those relationships we have already developed. Don't — no one owes you anything in this unloyal global environment. With all the turmoil and lack of job security, solid and dependable relationships are all the more precious. This is a necessary balancing act in competitive intelligence, since it is our relationships that drive our effectiveness.

TAKE A PROBLEM-SOLVING ATTITUDE, BUT DON'T SOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS

Bill Ury, internationally acclaimed professional peacemaker and negotiation specialist says, “Be hard on the problem, soft on the people.” This is the essence of negotiating projects with your competitive intelligence clients. Develop your skill at inventing options. Practice blameless problem solving. Be quick to ask questions and slow to judge. Avoid typical obstacles such as judging prematurely, fixating on one right answer, or assuming a fixed market size.

As a good competitive intelligence professional, you are naturally curious and have a good intuition about gathering enough information to gain an understanding of the market and the competition. But it's also tempting to jump to conclusions when pressed, before you gather enough facts or check the accuracy of the data. Don't fall into this trap.

Acknowledge your client's interests as part of the problem. People listen better if they feel you understand them. They assume that those who understand them are intelligent and sympathetic, and that their opinions might be worth listening to. Statements such as, "As I understand it, your interests are..." and "Have I understood you correctly?" go a long way. When I first meet competitive intelligence clients, I find it's best to ask, "What keeps you up at night?" or "What constitutes a home run and how can I help you achieve this success?" These two approaches can quickly give you the extremes of a person's work aspirations and problems.

Understand the role and importance of face-saving with your clients. Recognize and understand your emotions and theirs. Are you feeling nervous? Is your stomach upset? Are you facing crushing deadlines? Are you angry at your client, the requestor? Talk with people about their emotions, since this often makes the discussion less reactive and more productive. Very often I have noticed it is useful to tell an unrelated story or to allow my client to let off some steam before we get to business.

IDENTIFY THE CURRENCIES OF EXCHANGE WITH YOUR CLIENTS

You will most effectively develop a network of contacts if you are continuously figuring out ways you can help them be better. This goes beyond providing the competitive intelligence deliverables that you agreed to in your business environment.

Examples that are particularly relevant in competitive intelligence are providing timely information on the topics you know they are interested in (such as articles, web sites, perhaps an emerging competitor, relevant government regulations, or timely trends). When I worked at Bell Atlantic (before Verizon), a librarian continually sent me articles simply based on something I had asked her about. This was invaluable to me and was incredibly bonding. She was always a part of my CI team, which in turn kept her informed.

Clients often appreciate information about upcoming industry trade shows and conferences that they might want to attend. Or they might be interested in what you learned about the competition and market at a trade show that you know they didn't attend.

We can provide many references and make introductions, since in our work we meet so many people inside and outside the company who would never meet each other — except through us. We have the opportunity to gift people with connections that promote their own agendas.

AN EXCHANGE CURRENCY EXAMPLE

Bob Noller, a former CI manager at Hewlett Packard, shares his story from the late 1990s of collecting competitive data using the company's design engineers, who did not report to him. The senior manager of the design engineers sponsored the effort. Bob was allowed to leverage a portion of the engineers' time to do the collection and analysis work. The engineers helped with intelligence collection in addition to their other duties because they were motivated by the prospect of being promoted.

However, these young design engineers needed visibility with management to support their promotions. Bob's access to management, using competitive

analysis as the "currency," provided the motivation. In addition, these engineers were very technical and wanted to broaden their business understanding, which they accomplished through their participation in the competitive analysis.

As team leader, Bob pushed these engineers to make forward-looking technology, product, and business projections, which was out of their comfort zones and not easy for them. Bob had the individual engineers present their competitive and business intelligence directly to the senior managers in staff meetings. As part of this process, Bob coached each design engineer on how to make the presentation and had the engineers rehearse their presentations with him.

The process was very successful. Bob had about 25 percent of the engineers promoted off the team. Once an engineer was promoted, the motivation wasn't applicable to him, and by mutual agreement, that person was dropped from the team. One engineer was on this team for fewer than nine months before being promoted.

This was a win/win situation for Hewlett Packard. The intelligence provided was applied to management decision-making for numerous investments. It was also shared with other business groups to improve their understanding and decision-making, becoming the de facto source for this type of intelligence. This was a low overhead competitive intelligence process, as it used existing engineering resources with a minimal budget for information sources. It was very successful both in terms of the high quality of information and longevity (that is, avoiding budget cuts).

LOOKING FORWARD

Much of what has been described in these first three cooperative intelligence practices and attitudes is really just good manners and respect.

However, in today's increasingly frenetic corporate business world, people in their haste often forget their good manners — not intentionally, but because of stress. We have too few bodies for the work that must be accomplished in corporations. As competitive intelligence professionals, we must operate in this atmosphere. If we present a good example, it is amazing how responsive our sources of competitor data can be!

In my next column, I will continue the discussion of cooperative intelligence practices:

- Be a source for acknowledgment and appreciation.
- Promote continual communication.

Ellen Naylor, founder of Business Intelligence Source, has been a competitive intelligence practitioner and consultant for more than 20 years and an active SCIP member since 1990. The Business Intelligence Source's offerings range from development of a CI process, conduct of a win/loss or trade show analysis, and training workshops. The Business Intelligence Source's latest practice, cooperative intelligence, helps CI professionals become more effective in networking and communicating with people — the backbone of any successful CI operation. Business Intelligence Source is a SCIP premier partner, and Ellen is a SCIP Catalyst Award winner and a member of SCIP's Women's Leadership Council. She lives at 9,000 feet in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado with her husband, Rodgers the artist, and with Cocoa the cat. If you have any comments on this column, Ellen would love to hear from you at answers@thebisorce.com. ●

SCIP CI Career Center

SCIP has redesigned our CI Career Center to help employers and job seekers in the competitive intelligence community connect. A job bank feature is available for employers looking for qualified CI professionals to post their listings of career opportunities in competitive intelligence and other related fields for visitors to search and view. It also allows members of the society and site users a place to post their resumes for free. Visit www.scip.org today to access the career center. The new CI Career Center offers a number of advanced features including a Job Alert system that notifies job seekers by email of new job opportunities that match their search criteria and an anonymous resume feature that enables job seekers to list their experience and qualifications in a protected environment. This service allows job seekers to stay connected to the employment market while maintaining full control of their confidential information.

