

***The Transformational Trainer – Creating Clients for Life***  
***By Jon Denoris & Gary Stebbing***

In the world of Personal Training there is no shortage of technical information available, just one scan through the programme track of any fitness convention will demonstrate that by far the most popular topics for Personal Trainers are “how to do it sessions” including abdominal training, low back rehab and the such like, the “science” sessions if you will. Whenever the art of personal training is discussed it invariably gets the yeah...yeah response. By that I mean yeah yeah, I know about all that, the importance of relationship building, trust, listening etc etc... I do all that, it’s the technical skills I need to develop not the soft stuff.

Our experience observing and talking to trainers, and years of working with clients suggests quite the opposite.

How good are we REALLY in the “Art of working one-on-one with clients”?

One thing we believe is absolutely clear, the most successful trainers no matter what your criteria of measurement are those that are masters in this area.

We are not saying that sound technical skills are not vital to the development of any discerning fitness professional, of course they are, but that there still lies a whole area of trainer development, indeed a *new skill set* we believe that has yet to be adequately addressed within Personal Training. We call it the “**Clients for Life**” mindset or (CFL) and understanding and applying the principles of this thinking will catapult your business and training to new levels.

**“Hang out with more Weirdo’s!”**

Our approach draws not only on our own experiences but upon experiences and theories from the worlds of business, high-performance coaching, counselling and behavioural change. We believe we need to look outside the world of fitness to discover new examples of best practice, benchmarks and creativity. In the words of Tom Peters we need to “hang out with more weirdo’s!” or as legendary leader Jack Welch says “you gotta be on the lunatic fringe”. Point being; in order to think differently you need to change your point of reference, you need to evolve.

**Relationship Building**

The essence of what we do as Personal Trainers’ is *relationship building* or what the business world calls Customer Relationship Marketing.

We found it interesting to note that the #1 quality that the research suggests is essential for any practitioner to possess whilst working within “an effective helping role” is that of strong interpersonal skills (Najavits & Weiss 1994 cited Hunt and Hillsdon).

This can be traced back even further to the work of Carl Rogers who in the 1950’s defined the core qualities which appear to be linked to helping as;

- Unconditional Acceptance; accepting your clients with no strings attached, regardless of their thoughts, behaviours and feelings. Placing all biases and prejudices aside. Not to be confused with approval or liking
- Genuineness or congruence; being real, able to relate in a sincere and non-defensive way.
- Being empathic; understanding of the world through your clients eyes, through careful listening and accurate reflection

### **The Key to Effectiveness**

Sheth and Sobel cite *empathy* as the *key* to personal effectiveness, defining it as the ability to perceive other people’s emotions and thoughts. (Clients For Life 2000) We feel this can enable us (trainers) to understand the world from the perspective of our clients. This might allow us to form deep and meaningful relationships, and respond more effectively. **How important are these skills for us as Personal Trainers!?** We believe them to be vital as they allow us to learn about our clients and become more innovative and effective. I make no apology for labouring the point here on empathy; Miller (1983) suggests that it accounts for 67% of the total effectiveness of a helping relationship.

### **The Skilled Helper**

If these qualities are present then a “Therapeutic alliance” may exist. This implies hard work on the part of both practitioner and client in the effective relationship, and was first used by Egan in his authoritative text titled *The Skilled Helper*.

These qualities also help us to develop trust, as demonstrated in our trust formula below;

$$\text{Client's Trust} = \frac{\text{Integrity X Competence}}{\text{Risk}}$$

Your client's perception in each factor in the equation will raise or lower the trust they place in you.

### **Transaction to Transformation**

We thus move from a transactional trainer to that of a transformational trainer, one capable of creating "unique experiences" for your clients. In Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Work* (2000) he expands on this by calling it "the art of creating an environment through conversation and a 'way of being' that facilitates the process by which a person can move forward towards their goals in a fulfilling manner".

### **What's In An Experience**

In a recent presentation at FILEX we used the analogy of Oprah. If she were your Personal Trainer, what industry would she *really* consider herself to be in? Isn't she is really an analogy for developing the skills such as empathy, trust, listening skills and communication, and perhaps emotional intelligence or dare I say relationship intelligence (Holden 2005)

In the Experience Economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999) this concept is demonstrated superbly:

If you charge for *stuff* you are in the *commodity* business  
If you charge for *tangible things* then you are in the *goods* business  
If you charge for the *activities you execute* then you are in the *service* business

If you charge for the *time customers spend with you* then you are in the *experience* business

If you charge for *the demonstrated outcome the customer achieves* then AND ONLY THEN are you in the **transformation** business

### **Hanging With The Weirdo's Again!**

All Trainers with the 'Clients for Life' mindset are in the game to transform lives, and it will require great physical and emotional demands from you. It requires you to become a new kind of fitness leader, one who is a master listener, communicator and educator. An emotionally expressive and inspiring person who can create the right atmosphere rather than make all the right decisions himself/herself (Larsen 2005).

To help you get some clarity in the areas we have mentioned, in our next article we will get into the thinking, behaviour, skills and actions of a transformational trainer. We will explore the relationships this

builds and how when applied it will help you revolutionise your business and create clients for life.

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### **References & Recommended Reading**

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