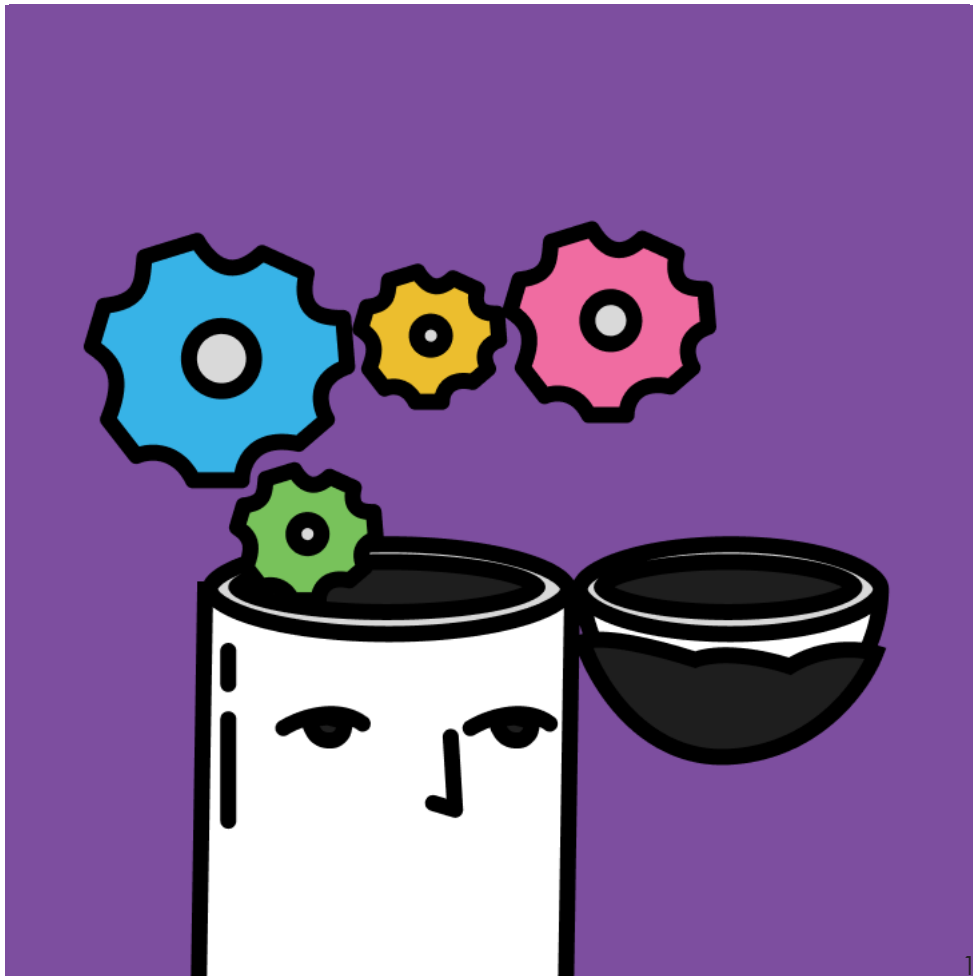
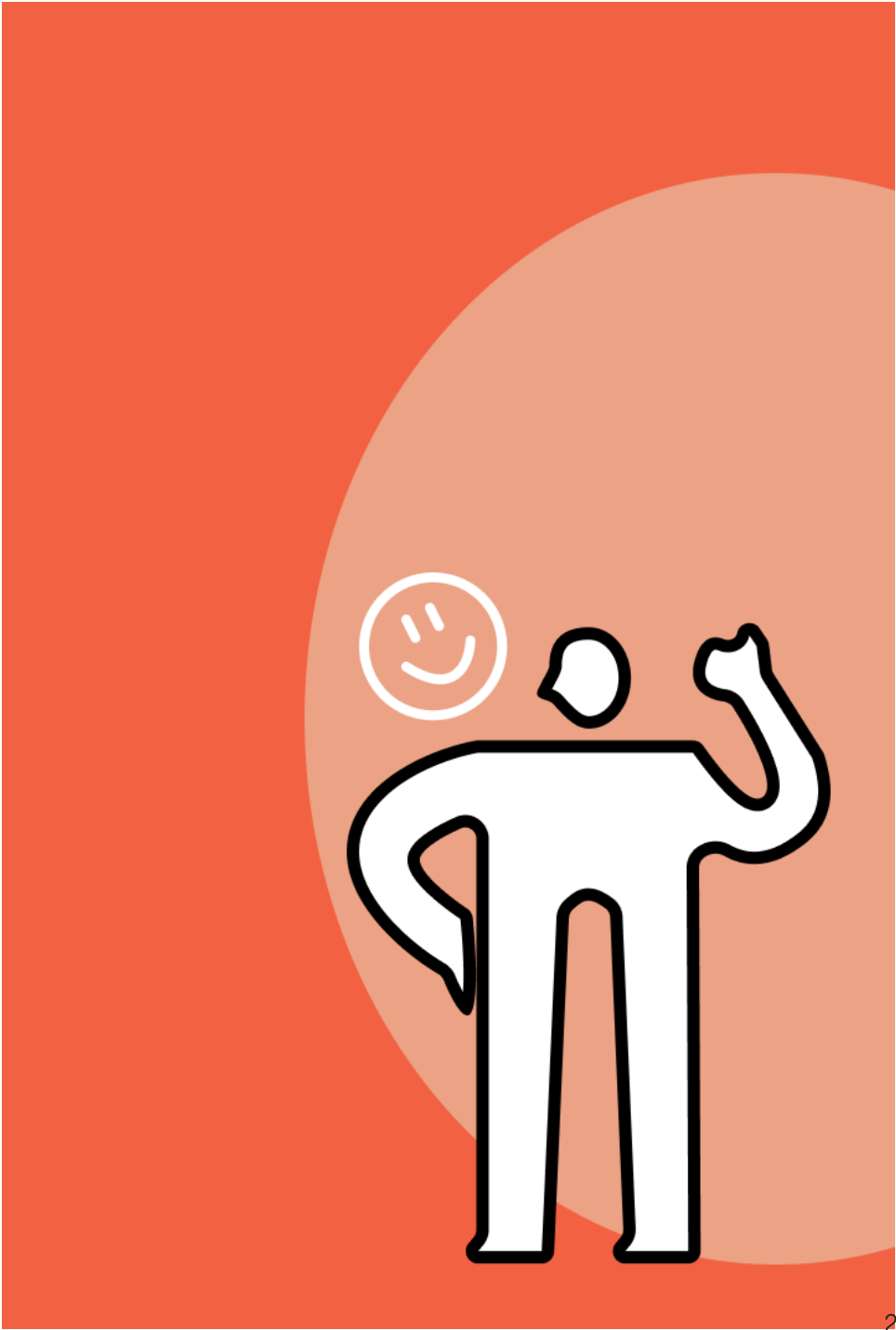


YOUR GUIDEBOOK TO TRUST

A book for an in-depth context into
building trust towards design process with clients





Preface

Dear Reader,

I'm delighted to have captured the journey of my thesis research in words by creating this concept of a guidebook that takes a moment to highlight elements that builds trust. The idea originated from my personal desire to establish my own design consultancy. Furthermore, design education puts a lot of emphasis on increasing customer and non-designer awareness about design. But they need to trust what designers are doing more than just raising awareness. As designers, we employ an abductive way of thinking, which is difficult for non-designers to grasp. Our procedure is disorganized, and the likelihood of confusion is high. I therefore grabbed the chance to demonstrate how to establish trust in order to solve this uncertainty for non-designers, specifically clients of a design consultancy.

The guidebook incorporates a narrative-based approach that highlights actions used to develop trust by sharing rich experiences. The goal of the book is to provide a detailed structure for how trust can be developed throughout the consultancies' design process. It includes data obtained through research and interviews with knowledgeable design consultants.

This book, in my humble view, will be helpful to those who would like to start collaborating with clients. You can be a self-starter, a freelancer, someone who wants to go from a company focused on product to a consultancy, someone who just graduated and wants to work in a consulting environment, or just someone who wants to develop relationships with clients. This book is not only appropriate for junior positions; it is also appropriate for senior responsibilities since it prompts you to consider trust rather than just put it in the back of your mind when working with clients.

Best,
Nivedhitha



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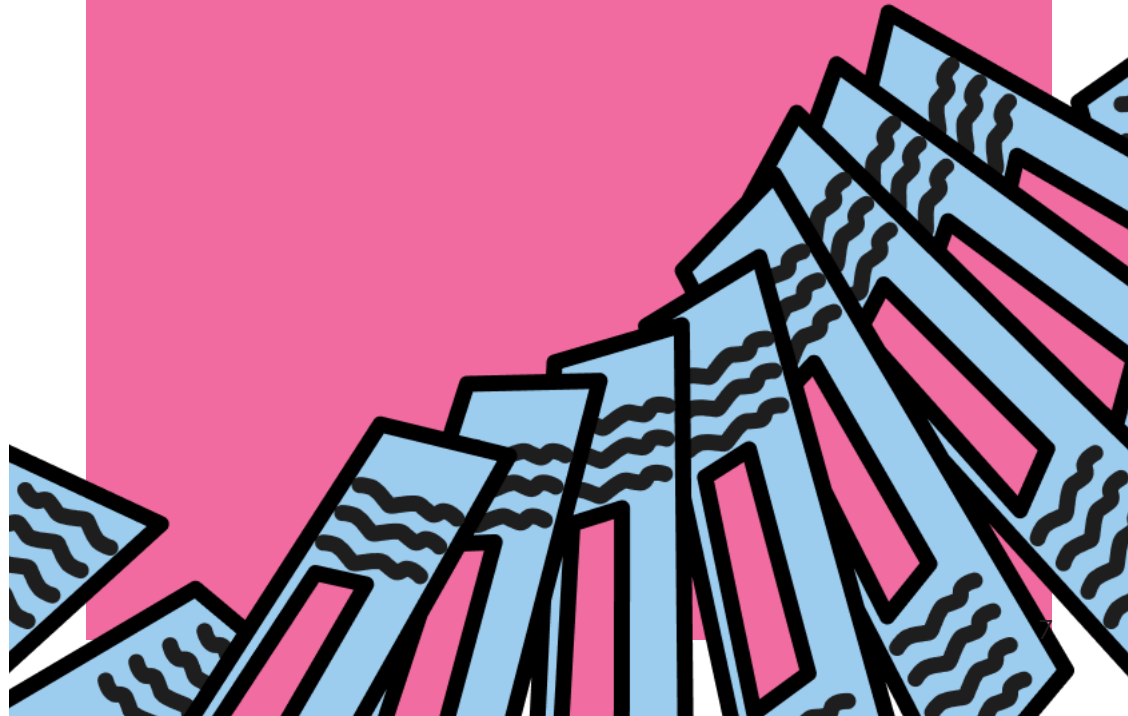
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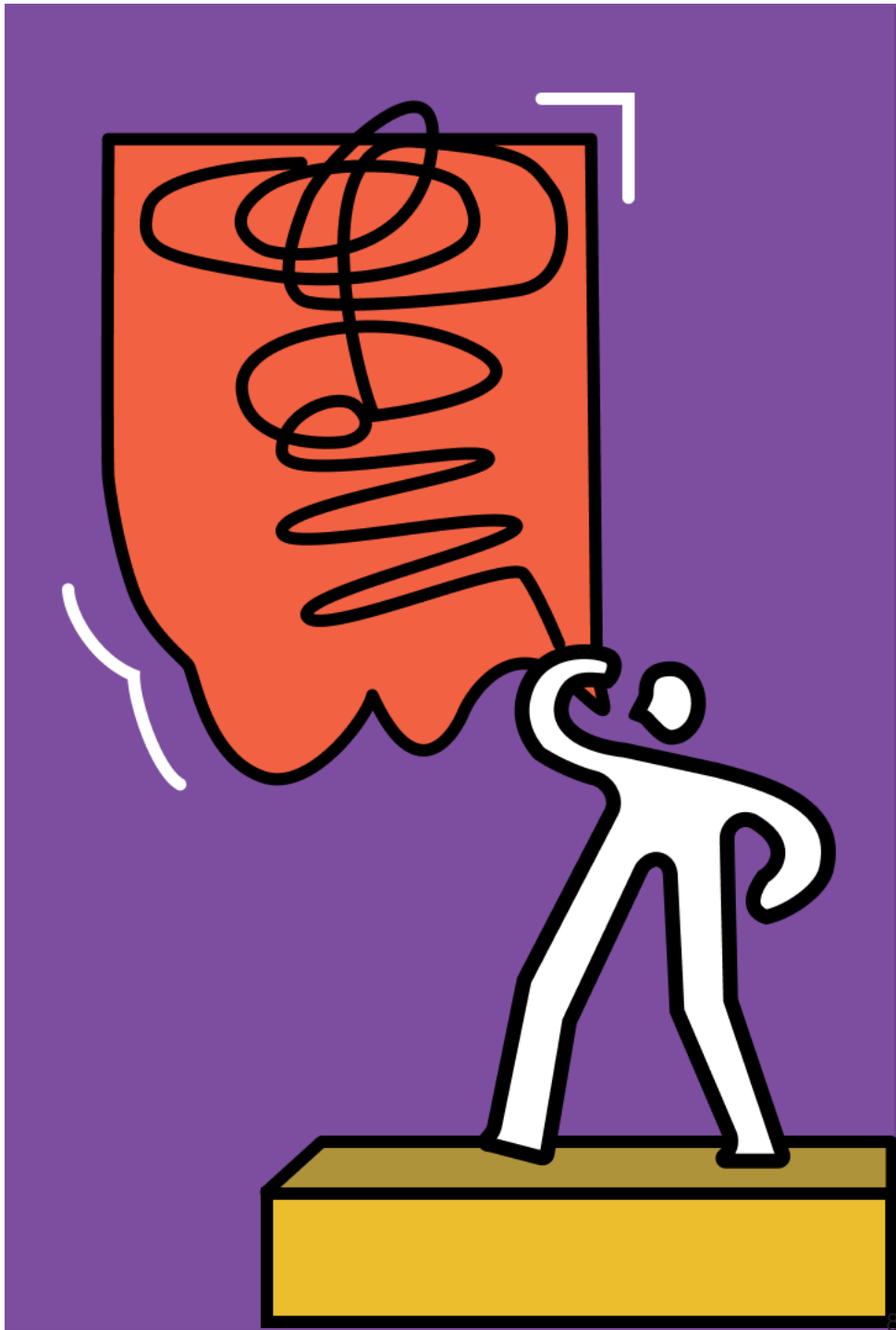
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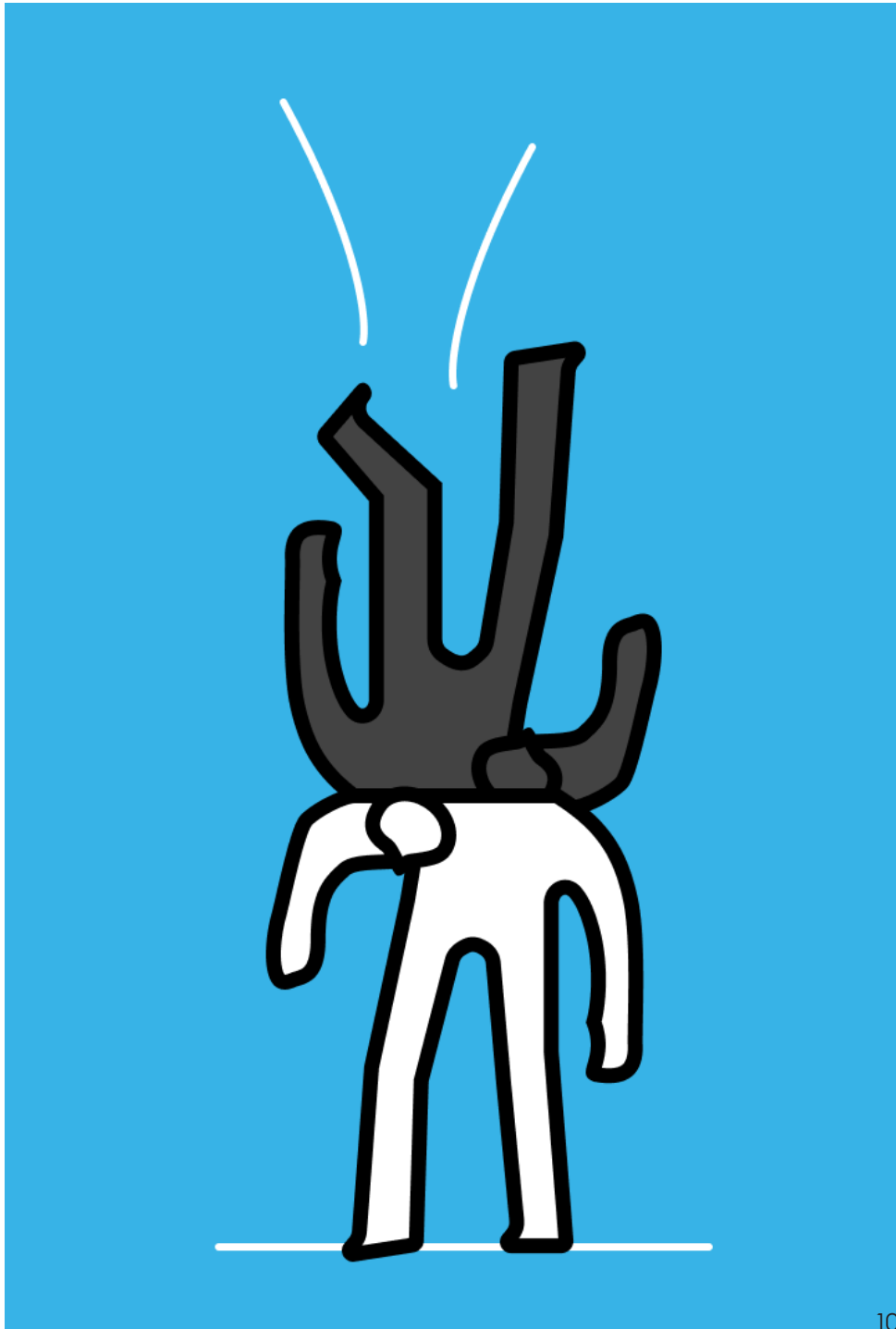
Conclusion

The book is meant to be a symbol
that puts focus on a subject that is
taken with little regard. *Trust*





What does trust mean to you?



so, what is trust?

Trust remains a subjective and evolving concept, varying from person to person and evolving with life's experiences. Defining trust precisely is challenging due to its dynamic nature. However, literature emphasizes two core aspects: embracing vulnerability and anticipating positive outcomes.

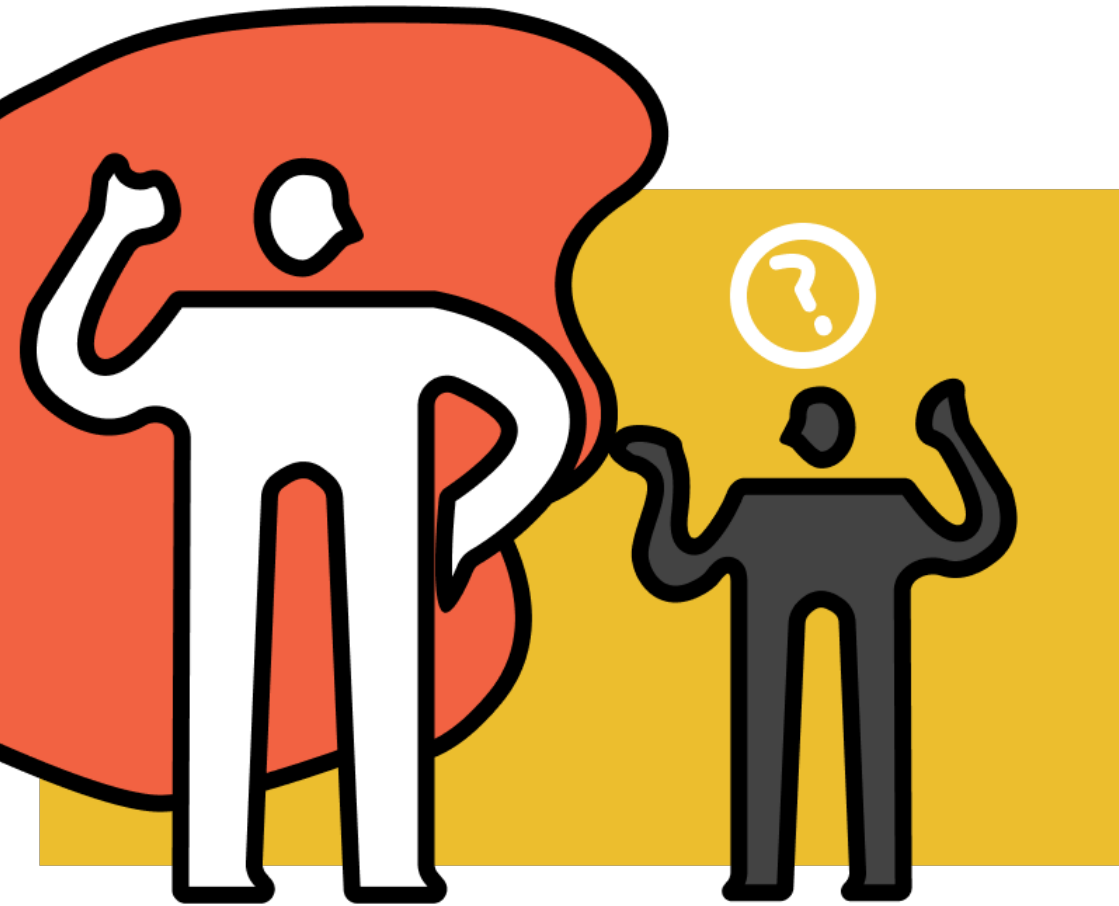
definition

“intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another.”

(Nikolova, Möllering, & Reihlen, 2015)

Importance of acknowledging trust

Trust holds immense value in all types of relationships. It serves as the foundation for a harmonious world, fostering a sense of belongingness. Depending on the context, trust brings various advantages to relationships. In a professional setting, trust among colleagues creates a satisfying work environment, allowing individuals to be authentic and accepted for their strengths and weaknesses. Trust with clients offers project satisfaction, low levels of micromanagement and better sense of accountability.



It plays a major role in our lives



trust between your family



trust in your friends



trust between your partner



trust in between your groupmates



trust in your colleagues



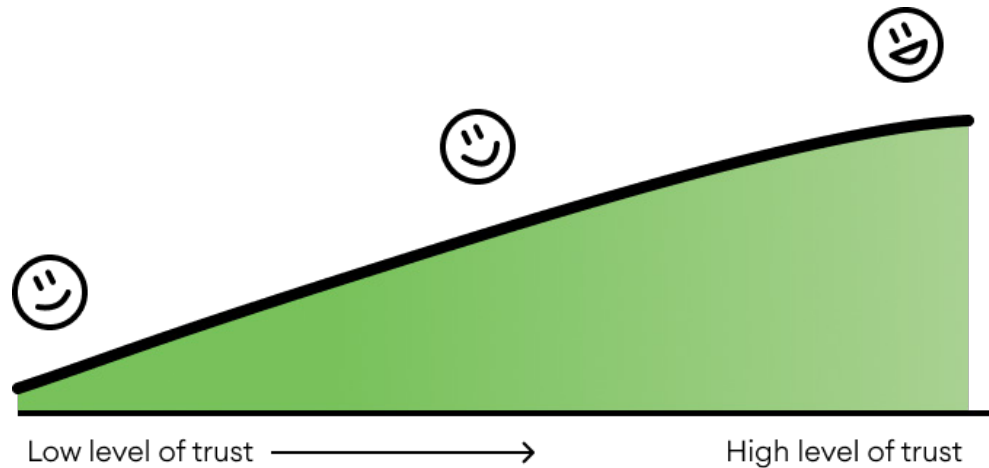
trust in your manager

It plays a pivotal role in various relationships, such as within families, friends, partners, colleagues, and managers. Recognizing the significance of trust is crucial, as without it, relationships suffer. Once trust is broken, rebuilding it becomes exceedingly difficult. Heightened levels of suspicion, fear, and anxiety emerge, emotions that are notoriously challenging to mend.

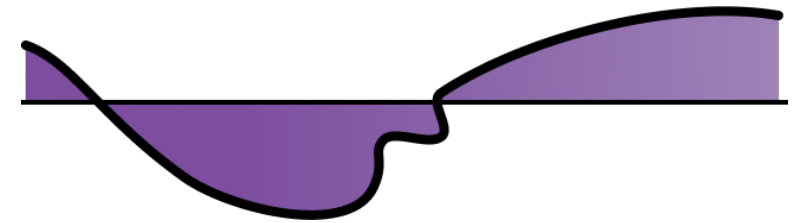
Considering the challenges of rebuilding trust once it's broken, wouldn't it be essential to proactively address the importance of building trust and invest efforts in cultivating more trusting relationships from the beginning?

Trust building is a process

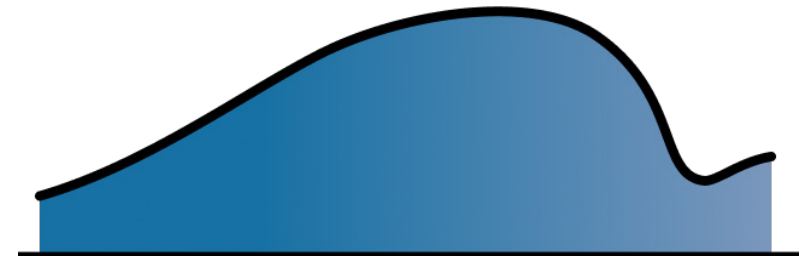
It's vital to grasp that trust is a gradual process. Initially, people may not trust you upon first meeting, but over time and with frequent interactions, trust can develop as you understand each other better.



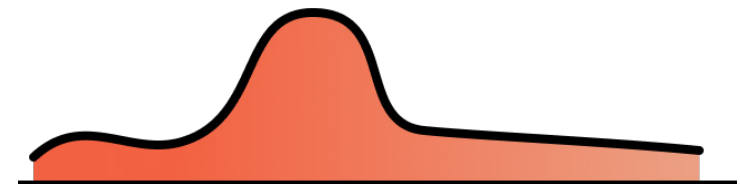
While we hope for smooth relationships, reality often presents challenges. You may encounter a rough start but take actions to rebuild trust, or you might begin positively and need extra effort to maintain it. Occasionally, distance might strain the connection. Trust is a dynamic journey with its ups and downs, and it's crucial to perceive it as an evolving process.



Trust level might start good but would break due to some circumstances. It can be regained but with a lot of effort.



When not seeing someone for a long time, trust falls but there is a chance to build it back again.



You might start with low trust, and eventually trust more for certain situations and then it goes back to low trust.

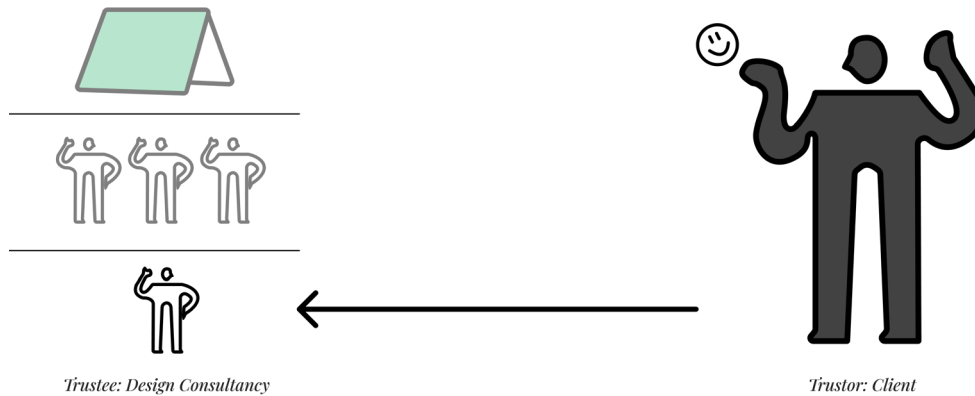


TRUST BUILDING WITH CLIENTS

Have you ever taken a moment to consider what it really means when someone tells you to "trust me" or "just trust what I am doing"? This book challenges you to reflect on the depth and value of trust. It is essential to comprehend how trust works and how it grows between a design consultant and clients. In light of this, the book is purposefully written to increase knowledge of trust and its importance. It offers an opportunity for you to reflect your current ways of working from people's experiences written as narratives structured along the phases of building trust.

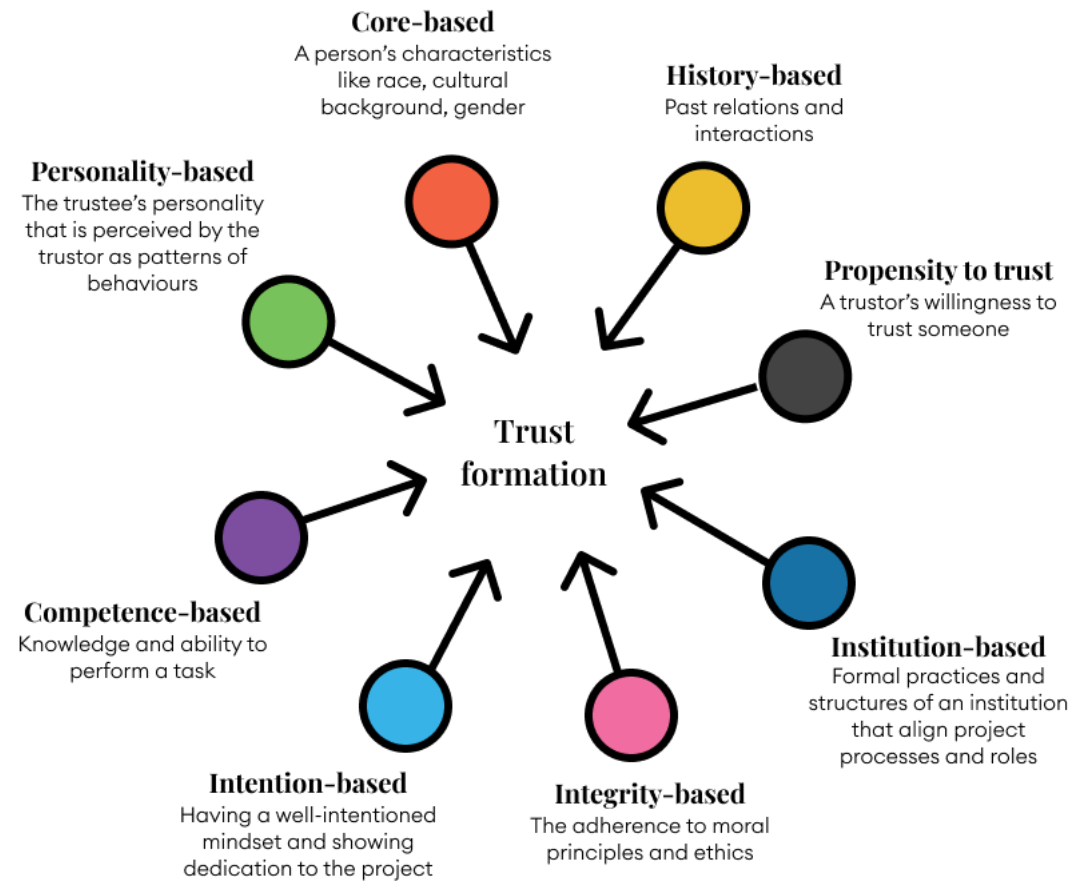
Design consultancies play a crucial role in guiding clients through the process of strategizing and developing new products and services, which can often be complex and abstract to comprehend. Therefore, building trust becomes paramount to foster mutual understanding and collaboration throughout the design process.

Speaking of the design process, it is inherently complex and can many times appear disorganized. To unlock maximum creativity and innovation, it is crucial to cultivate trust in the process itself. While building awareness of the process is important, gaining that awareness necessitates trusting the process in the first place. Essentially, we are aiming to build trust with clients towards the design process.



Design consultancies operate on three levels: individual, team, and institution. Trust formation is influenced by various aspects at each level. From an institutional perspective, factors like brand name, credibility, third-party opinions, and internal practices impact trust. At the team level, the team's experience, approachability, and work ethics contribute to trust-building. Although this guidebook will primarily focus on the individual level, exploring what influences trust from a consultant's perspective and providing actionable insights to cultivate trust throughout the design process.

This book focuses on trust formation at the interpersonal level, influenced by eight driving factors. These factors are defined in the accompanying image, and their impact on relationships varies depending on the entities involved and the specific situations. Actions are the visible manifestations of these driving factors, shaping clients' perception of the consultant. These actions can be tied to individual factors or a combination thereof, all of which will be explored further in this guidebook.

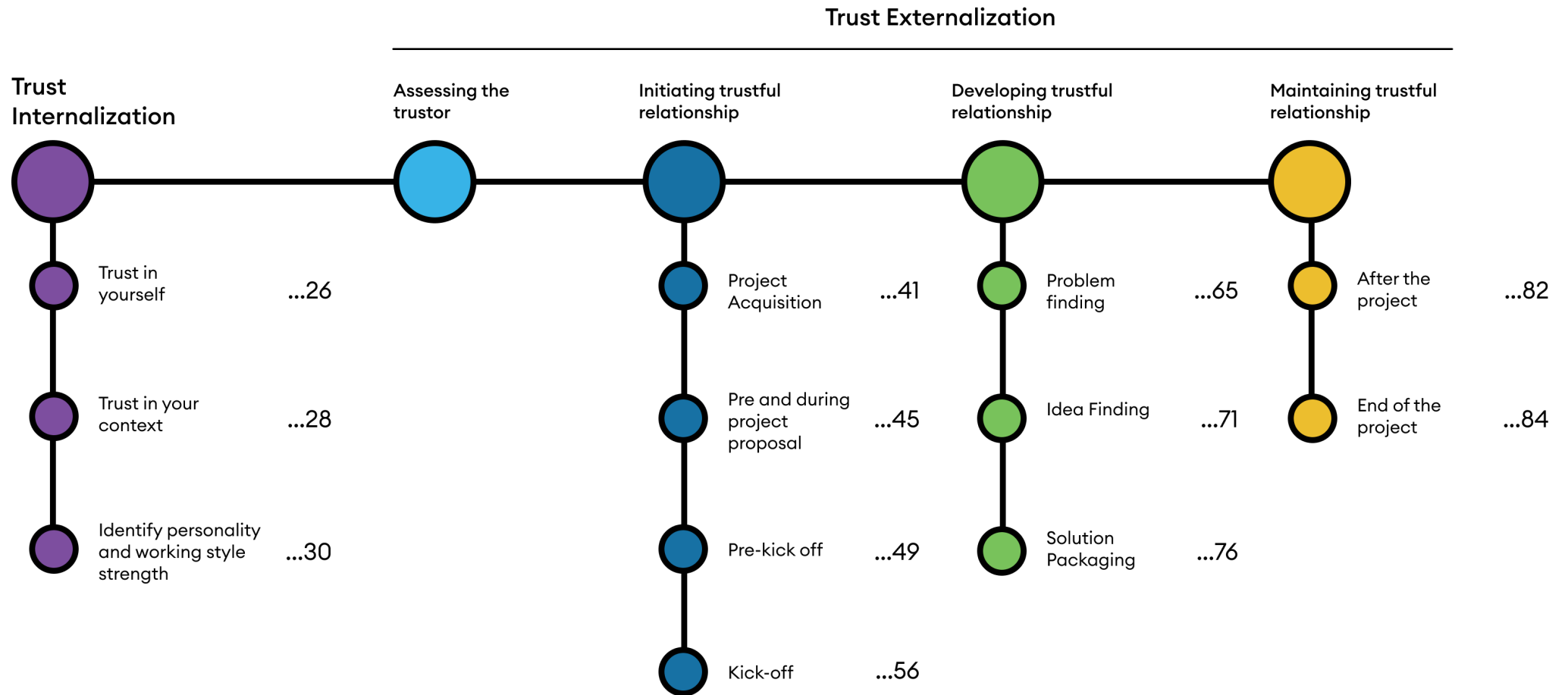


(Zucker, 1986), (Arifin, 2021), (Sucher & Gupta, 2021), (Mayer, 1995), (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998), (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011),

Trust building process

The trust building process with client or external parties begins with having trustful relationships internally, that is, to trust yourself, your context and identifying a strength that can be capitalized for building trustful relationships externally.

Trust externalization initiates with taking some time to assess the person you want to work with. The formation of a trustful relationship does not essentially happen step-wise, but more organically. Although in this book, it is shown as a step-wise process to give clarity on how it works.



TRUST INTERNALIZATION

The trust internalization process is a 3-step journey.

As famously said,

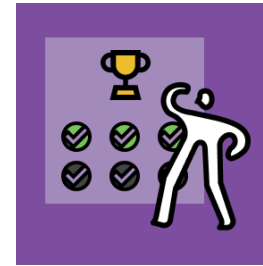
"Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom."

- Lao Tzu

A solid foundation for developing meaningful connections with others lies in cultivating self-trust and understanding your surroundings. By acknowledging your strengths and leveraging them to your advantage, you can foster trust in yourself and subsequently establish trust with those around you.



Although this has a huge importance before building trust with someone externally, this will not be covered deeply in this guidebook. The focus will primarily be for building trust with external parties.



Trusting yourself

The foundation of building trust with others lies in self-trust. When you have faith in your own decisions, extending trust to others becomes more natural. This becomes especially crucial in client and design consultancy relationships, where being a reliable and guiding partner is vital.



Trust in your organization and peers

Being in an environment where you feel comfortable and supported enables you to bring your best self to the table and enhances your overall engagement with clients. Moreover, trusting the company you work for instills a sense of alignment with its values and mission, allowing you to fully invest in your role and contribute to the organization's success.



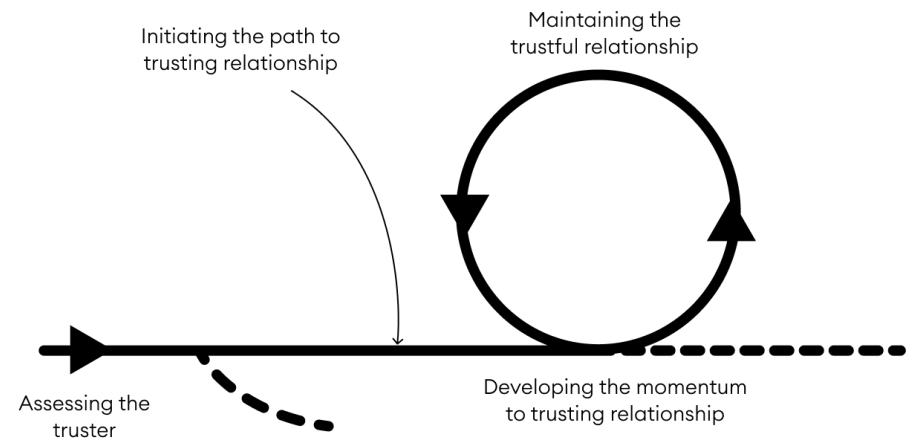
Identify your personality and working style strength

It is important to acknowledge that not everyone works the same way when building client relationships. Each person possesses a unique combination of personal working strengths and personalities. For instance, some individuals may be highly analytical and detail-oriented, preferring introversion in their approach. Clients might not immediately connect with them unless they witness their work and become impressed. On the other hand, some people exude a natural friendly nature and enjoy interacting with others. They form relationships more quickly and communicate more openly in their work style. Neither approach is right or wrong; it's about recognizing how you work and leveraging that understanding to communicate honestly and effectively with clients.

TRUST EXTERNALIZATION

Once you have a comprehensive understanding of your strengths, you are better equipped to embark on the journey of trust externalization.

The four-step process of externalizing trust may vary in intensity and may involve fewer or more steps depending on the situation. The four steps of the journey is below. The steps are further illustrated with narratives in the rest of the book.

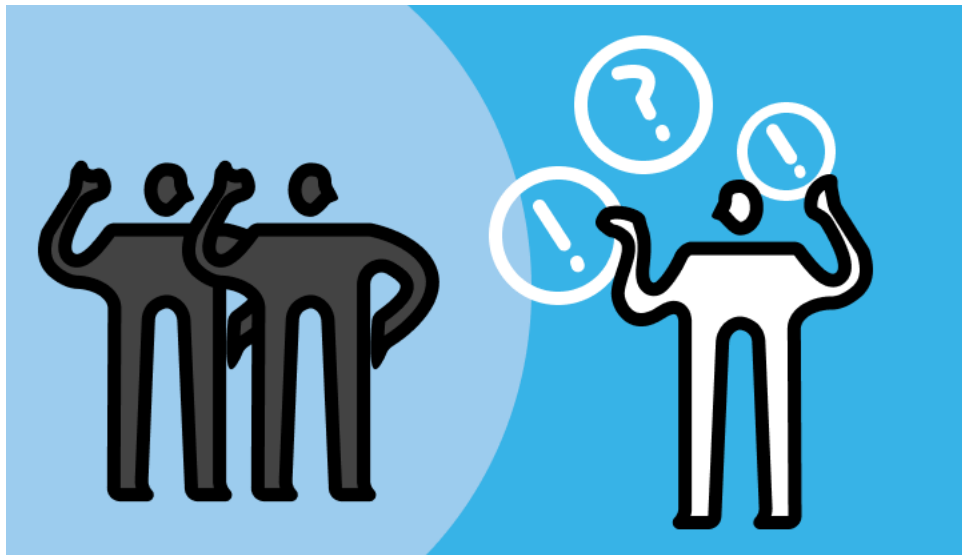


Establishing a solid and mutually beneficial connection is the key to gaining the trust of an external party, such as a client who needs your help.

Assessing the Trustor (Client)

Trust in any relationship is a two-way process, requiring mutual confidence and reliance. As a consultant, it is essential to carefully assess the client with whom you will be working. This evaluation forms a solid foundation, enabling you to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, it empowers you to select clients who align not only with the organization's values but also with your desire for a positive working relationship and personal well-being throughout the project.

Taking this step allows you to be assertive and discerning about your choice of clients, ensuring that you work with individuals who share common goals and working styles. This proactive approach also provides insight into how you may collaborate effectively with them.

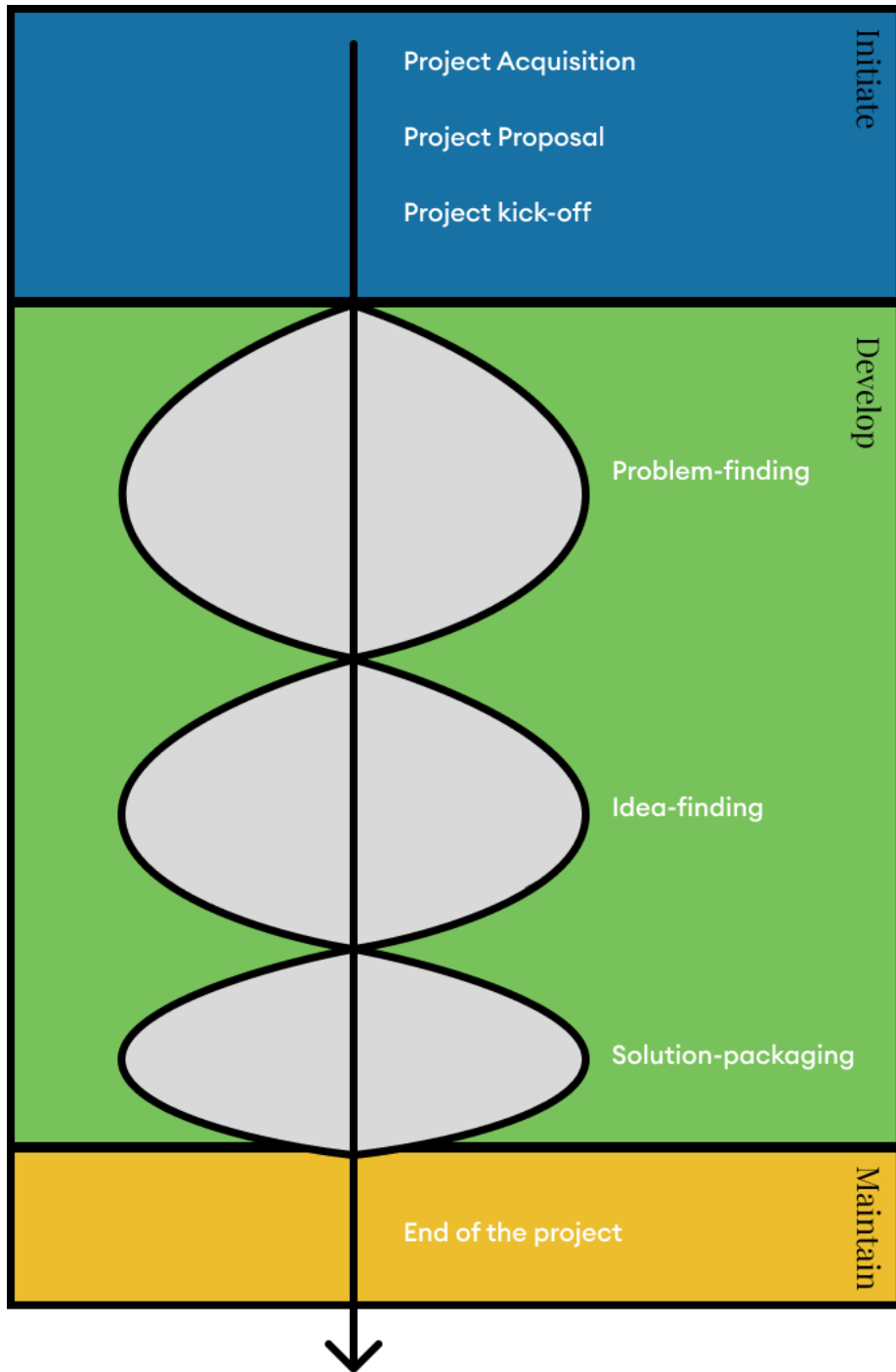


Additionally, assessing the client's propensity to trust is a crucial step in understanding the level of effort required to build a strong relationship. By gauging their willingness to trust, we gain insights into how to approach the relationship-building process effectively. It's essential to examine their working style, team dynamics, and mindset. Are they organized and respectful towards their team members? Are they open-minded or resistant to new ideas? These aspects offer valuable clues on how to best engage with the client and tailor our approach to align with their preferences and needs.

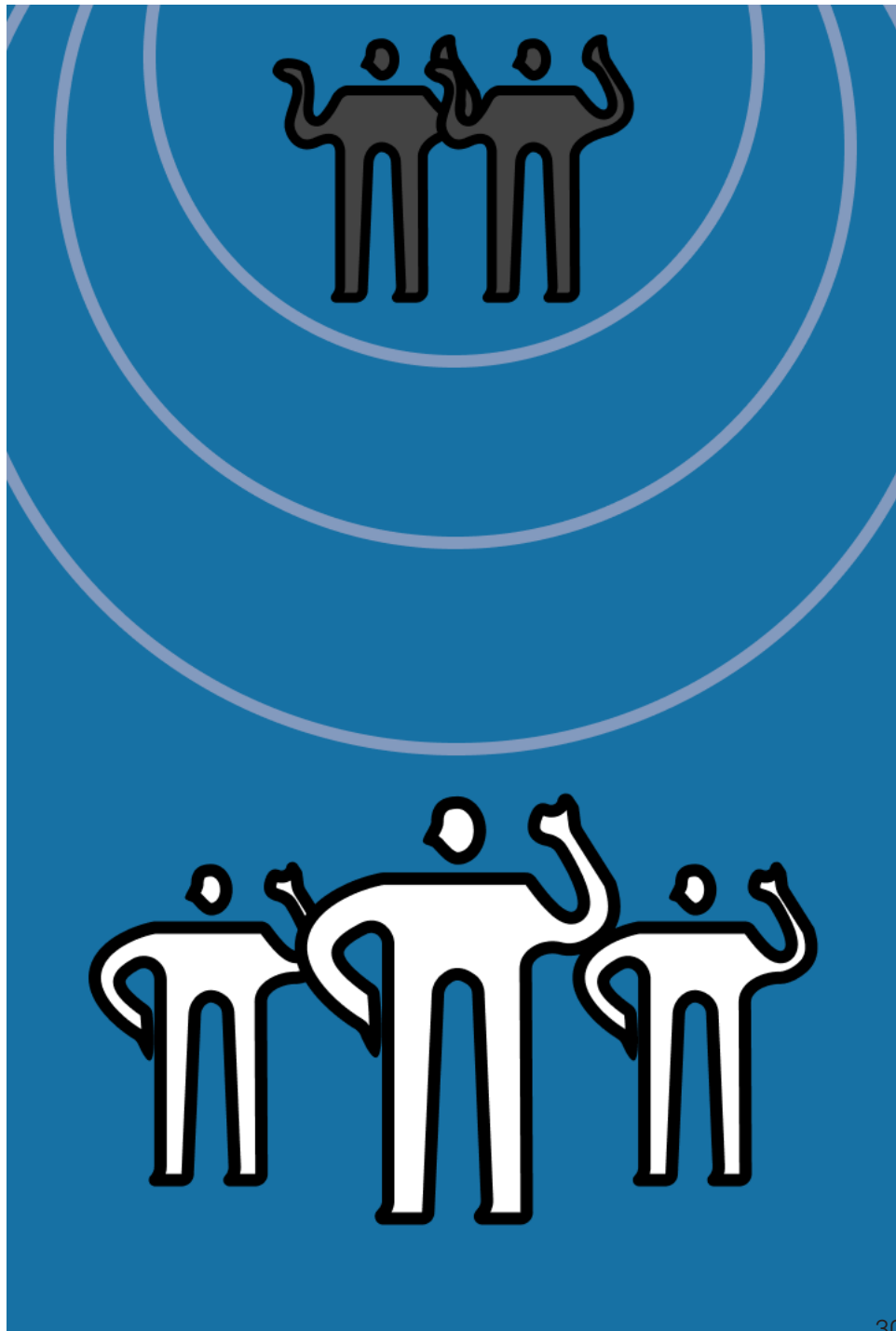
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At our organization, we are meticulous in selecting projects that align with our core principles. Recently, an energy accelerator start-up approached us seeking help with a specific part of their value chain. Initially, the project seemed promising, but upon closer examination, we realized it didn't fully align with our human-centered research approach, which is integral to our design consultancy. After thoughtful consideration and team discussions, we made the decision to decline the offer. While other agencies might have taken it on, we value our integrity, expertise, and intent above all else. This choice reaffirmed our commitment to meaningful work, showcasing our dedication to maintaining credibility and upholding our reputation for integrity.

”



By mapping trust formation against the sales and design processes, a clearer understanding of each phase's significance and the relevant trust-building actions emerges. This approach allows for a more focused and tailored strategy in addressing the needs of each phase and leveraging trust-building actions to effectively navigate the specific challenges presented at different stages.



Initiating the trustful relationship

Building a trusting relationship with the client initiates a pivotal phase that forms the bedrock of successful collaboration. Right from the outset, the focus lies on fostering rapport, grasping the client's distinct needs, and showing sincere interest in their objectives. This early stage is of utmost importance, as it lays the foundation for a strong and trusting bond between the consultant and the client. Making a positive and impactful impression during this initial phase sets the tone for the entire relationship.

Initiating the trustful relationship at the project acquisition phase.

During the project acquisition phase, the sales process plays a pivotal role in convincing customers to choose your organization. Clients are highly discerning during this stage, carefully evaluating where to invest their resources and who they can trust. How can a positive impression be created effectively through trust building approaches, assuring clients that placing their trust in your organization is a prudent and rewarding choice?



32

Initiating trust by **showing credibility**

One of the most effective trust-building actions in project acquisition is showcasing previous work and experiences. It helps improve credibility of one's capabilities.

“

Clients often seek reassurance that they are making the right choice by partnering with a consultant or organization. **By sharing a portfolio of past projects, case studies, and success stories, you provide tangible evidence of your capabilities and the value you bring to the table.**

We were in conversations with a client to acquire the project. Myself and someone from the sales team, we picked out projects we worked on that were similar to what the potential client was doing. **When you do not have projects that have absolutely similar aspects, you can show projects that are in the same field as the client and projects that have a similar ask or approach.**

When clients can see tangible results and real-world examples of how you have addressed challenges and achieved positive outcomes for previous clients, it instils confidence in your expertise. It demonstrates your track record of delivering on promises and meeting client expectations. You can also present testimonials or endorsements from satisfied clients as it further reinforces your credibility and reliability.

By showing previous work and experiences, you not only provide clients with a glimpse into your capabilities but also allow them to envision how you could potentially add value to their own projects.

”

Program Manager from an Acquired design consultancy

Show previous work and experiences

33

Initiating trust by **being responsive**

At the core of project acquisition lies the understanding that you will be working for the client's benefit. Rather than solely promoting your capabilities, it is essential to empathize with their concerns and explore how you can address and enhance their vision.

“

The client approached us after reviewing our website, acknowledging our specific skills. However, uncertainties remained about their precise requirements and how we could align with their needs. In design processes, clients often present concrete briefs that necessitate reframing, adding another layer of trust-building. When faced with clients who have vague ideas, being responsive becomes crucial. Rather than dismissing their viewpoint, it is essential to comprehend their perspective deeply. This involves asking pertinent questions and actively listening to unravel their pain points. Rather than immediately showcasing our capabilities, **prioritizing the client's problems** and inquiries allows us to collect comprehensive information. Armed with this understanding, we can then demonstrate precisely how our expertise can address their unique needs and aspirations.

”

Senior Business Designer from a Large independent design consultancy

Be more responsive to client's needs

Initiating trust with **strong boundaries**

The example provided in the section assessing the trustor (the project declining scenario) offers valuable insights into trust formation during the project acquisition phase.

“

Establishing clear boundaries on the scope of work, including what you will and will not undertake, demonstrates how you prioritize tasks and strive for optimal results. This practice not only showcases strong organizational values but also fosters trust in your abilities. Such trust-building can open doors to potential future projects that might align better with your expertise. A real-life example illustrates this point: when a client approached us with a project involving agency work, which diverged from our typical areas of expertise rooted in comprehensive research outcomes, we respectfully **declined the opportunity**. Our decision, driven by a commitment to our core principles, led the client to refer us to another individual who sought our specialized assistance. **By standing firm in our values and capabilities**, we showcased our determination, ultimately strengthening our reputation and fostering trust in our services.

”

Program Manager from an Acquired design consultancy

Communicate your intentions regarding the project openly and honestly

Setting strong but healthy boundaries on projects

Initiating trust with aligned communication

Communication to the client from different departments of the company should be aligned, this example illustrates its importance.

“

In many instances, project sales are handled by different teams or individuals, such as the marketing or sales team, including senior personnel. In this specific project's case, the sales team secured the deal. However, from the beginning, gaining the client's trust proved to be a challenging task.

Regrettably, we realized this particular project was oversold with grand promises, resulting in unrealistic expectations. The sales team not communicating based on the actual outcome delivery potential, made the clients paint an amazing picture about the expected outcome for themselves. Which made it difficult for us to achieve. Although I had confidence in my abilities, meeting such exaggerated expectations seemed nearly impossible. Despite the difficulties, we resolutely undertook the project, and it unfolded as a demanding and intricate endeavour. Nonetheless, we persisted and eventually delivered results that earned their trust.

In retrospect we saw how consistent communication across the departments is important. **If each team communicates differently to the client, trust wavers.** We initiated to have meeting with the sales team and set templates on how to conduct sales. We also offered to have inter-team discussions to better conduct sales. It imparted valuable lessons about managing expectations and how aligned communication solves that.

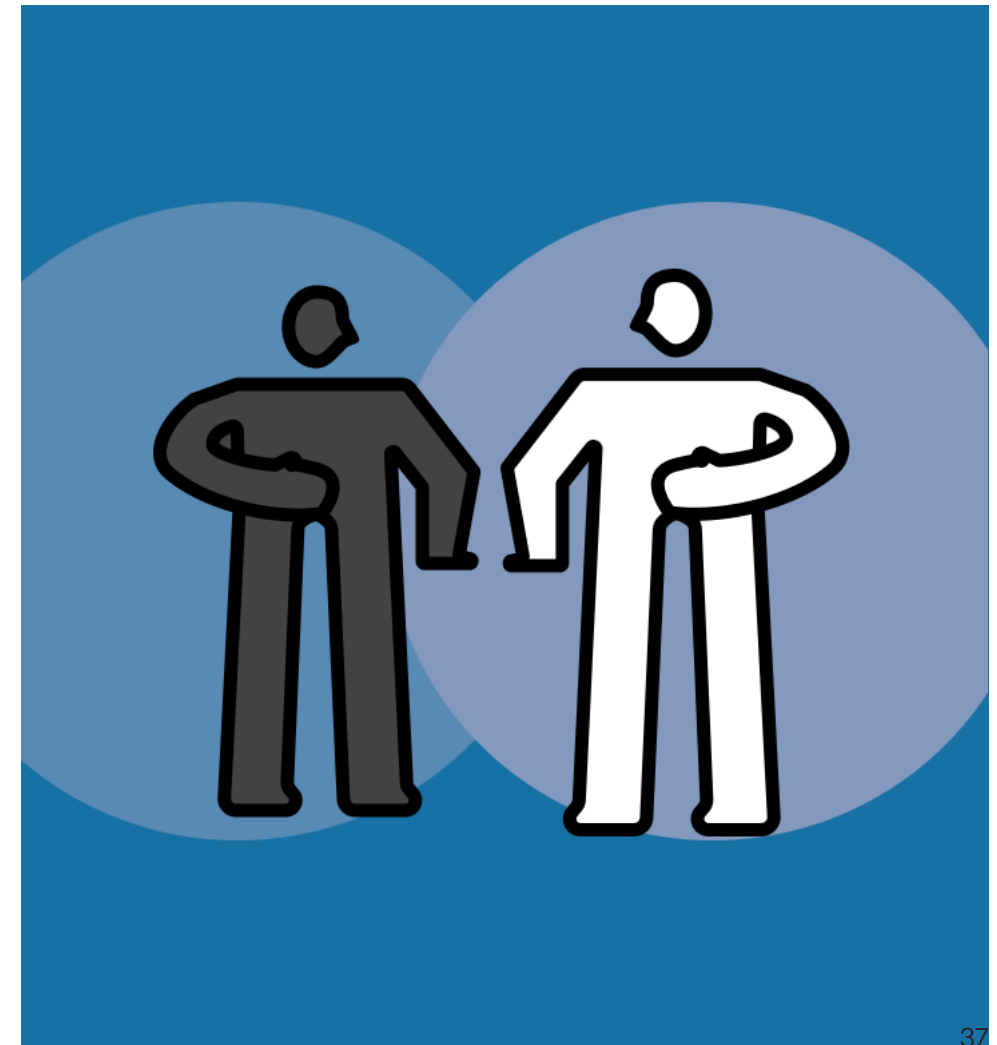
”

Junior Business Designer from a Large independent design consultancy

Maintaining a consistent communication language

Initiating the trustful relationship at the pre and during project proposal phase.

It is the point where clients have taken a leap of faith in your capabilities and are now eager to assess if you can fulfil their expectations. This pivotal moment requires a thoughtful approach to build and solidify trust. How can you achieve this? This section delves into the art of fostering trust through the creation of a compelling project proposal and conducting pre-proposal sessions.



Initiating trust with [expectation clarification](#)

When initiating to work with clients, they always come with some presumptions. They have some expectations, and you want to deliver the best. When you do not know expectations of the client, you might be working towards a wrong direction. How do you ensure to keep expectations aligned?

“

I was heavily involved in creating the proposal that initiates the client project. I have always been leading this phase to ensure that the kick-off of the project would be smooth. To ensure this, I find it important to take some actions that helps both the parties, the client and my team to be clear with their responsibilities. This is my approach to the situation, the proposal creation part goes back and forth with changes till we reach a point that everyone is happy. During this time, you need to be a person who understands the problem but also understands the client's role perspective and ambitions. In essence, you really need to appear knowledgeable, thoughtful and informed.

Another thing that I always follow in my line of work, is to just sit with them and have a clear conversation about our vision for the outcome. We have [a transparent communication about expectations](#) which can really just include, who is responsible for what encompassed in role and responsibility, how would the communication happen, defining the desired project outcome, and setting an appropriate timeline. We also go on to discuss the project approach we decide to take for their topic and address any doubts or issues. We find the design process to be quite abstract, sometimes making it difficult for the clients to follow, so it is good to clarify expectations and set a good mindset for the project. It proceeds to cover technical aspects like budget allocation and communication flow. This sets a good foundation for ensuring we do what's right for them. I believe this shows how interested and motivated you are to find them the best solutions

”

[Business Director from a Large independent design consultancy](#)

[# Clarify expectations through transparent and flexible communication.](#)

Initiating trust with [legal binding, contracts](#)

Creating a legally binding contract is a standard practice in the consulting industry, and it plays a vital role in building trust between parties.

“

A well-drafted contract establishes accountability and sets clear standards for the project's execution. In some cases, agreements may be initiated with limited information, [making it essential to go in depth and simultaneously leave the option to add more details in the contract.](#) The design process inherently involves uncertainty, and outcomes may evolve beyond the initial scope. By reflecting this adaptability in the contract and allowing for revisions as needed, both parties can navigate changes with greater ease.

Effective project planning, separate from the contract, is crucial to accommodate [unforeseen adjustments during the project journey.](#) [Planning with room for change enables the team to be more receptive](#) to altering decisions based on evolving requirements. For example, if the project initially set a specific amount of time for each phase, but during the idea generation phase, it becomes apparent that more time is needed due to reframing the problem, clear communication with the client is essential. By openly discussing such adjustments and involving the client in the decision-making process, trust is reinforced, and a collaborative atmosphere is fostered. Overall, a flexible approach to both contract and project planning is integral to navigating uncertainties, minimizing risks and maintaining a transparent and trustworthy relationship with clients.

”

[Senior Design Consultant from a Large Independent design consultancy](#)

[# Ensure a legal binding to hold accountability for the trustee and reduce fear for trustor](#)

[# Plan with room for change and be open to change in your decisions](#)

Initiating trust with expectation clarification

There is a crucial need for clarifying expectations through transparent communication as it helps in building a shared communication and thinking model between the clients and design consultancy

“

During a recent project, we successfully secured a contract based on our initial proposal. However, the statement of work lacked specificity, leaving the client with the impression that they could dictate our actions throughout the project. As the project progressed, it became evident that the client's requirements far exceeded what we had initially anticipated, resulting in a project scope five times larger than the original agreement. Recognizing the disparity, I approached my superiors and emphasized the importance of renegotiating the terms to accurately reflect the project's true scale and scope.

This led to a challenging conversation with the client, who felt their trust had been betrayed by our request for additional funds. This experience highlighted the **critical need for clearly defined expectations and commitments in consulting engagements.** To prevent misunderstandings and foster trust, it is essential to outline roles, responsibilities, and anticipated outcomes within a comprehensive contract. This ensures that both parties have a mutual understanding and agreement on deliverables and compensation.

Effective project management hinges on establishing a solid foundation of trust through diligent documentation and client buy-in. By proactively addressing potential discrepancies and uncertainties, we can build trust, enhance transparency, and pave the way for a successful project journey.

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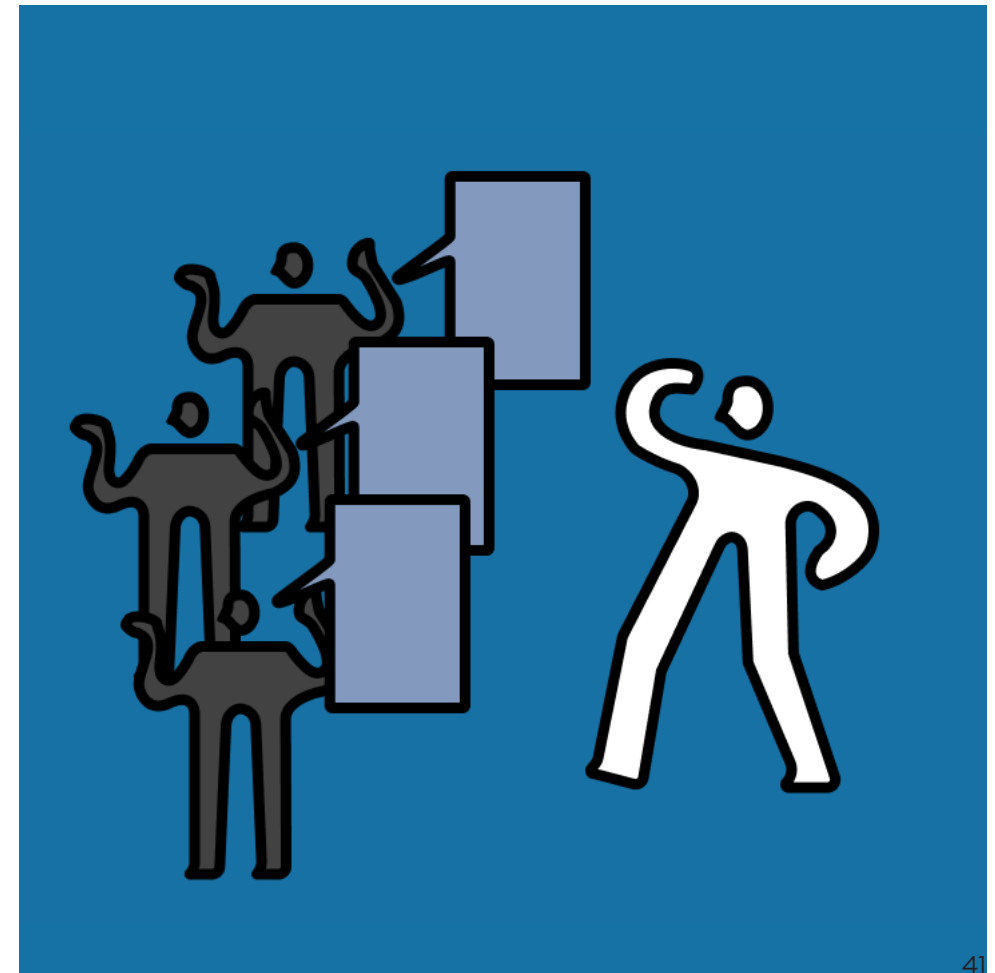
Senior Design Consultant from a Large Independent design consultancy

Clarify expectations through transparent and flexible communication

Initiating trust during project pre-kick-off

Having signed the agreement, you and the client have solidified your commitment to working together. Expectations are clear regarding the desired outcomes and the project's approach based on the brief provided. With the time and budget in place, the project commences, beginning with a pre-kick off session to delve deeper into the context. During this crucial phase, the focus is entirely on the clients.

The primary objective of the pre-kick off session is to gather essential information from the clients, allowing you to better understand their needs and aspirations. A client-centric approach ensures that their voice is heard and valued.



Initiating trust by similar experiences and interests

An example of having someone with similar experience on the project is beneficial is illustrated below.

“

Having someone in the team with a personal interest in the project’s topic or prior experience in a related field proves immensely beneficial. While it may not be necessary for the entire team, having at least one member with such qualities can significantly impact client trust. Clients tend to have greater confidence in the team’s ability to understand their needs when they see someone with a relevant background onboard.

In a recent project, we observed the value of this first-hand. Initially, the team consisted of a senior consultant and a junior consultant, but during the pre-kick-off phase, they encountered a steep learning curve in grasping the domain intricacies. However, the situation changed when someone with experience in a similar field, stepped in. This individual’s familiarity with the subject matter facilitated the gathering of relevant information and enabled effective reframing of the project’s communication for the entire team.

Moreover, we have witnessed instances where team members who proactively show interest in the topic, even if they lack prior experience, go above and beyond the project’s requirements. Their genuine involvement is evident through active participation in workshops, conferences, and extensive research during both the pre-kick-off and research phases.

Ultimately, having someone with personal interest or relevant experience in the team enhances the team’s capability to comprehend the project’s complexities and effectively address client needs.

”

Design Consultant from a Large Independent design consultancy

Gain advantage through experience and/or personal interest in the client’s project domain

Additional efforts spent for client is appreciated

Initiating trust with active listening and questioning

An example of how asking questions and listening intently shows genuine interest and for you as a consultant gives reliable information to work with.

“

For a productive and meaningful discussion, it is crucial to craft open-ended questions that elicit useful responses. Additionally, recognizing the client’s expertise in their field and leveraging it is key. Engage them in discussions about their work, motivations, resources, communication methods, processes, and work approach. By gathering resources from the client that could be useful for the project, you create a more informed project approach.

To foster a comfortable atmosphere for open communication, arrange one-on-one interactions with the reporting team. These personal interactions enable individuals to express themselves more freely. During pre-kick off sessions conducted offline, utilize whiteboards to immediately map out the clients’ input. This approach allows them to shape and make corrections, enhancing their involvement in the process. For online sessions, leverage online collaboration tools to facilitate smooth interactions.

Throughout the discussion, active listening remains paramount. Pay close attention to the client’s words and intentions to gain comprehensive insights. If maintaining the conversation becomes challenging, seek permission to record the session, ensuring no valuable information is missed.

Always remember that the focus should be on the clients. By centering the discussion around their needs, perspectives, and aspirations, you establish a client-centric approach that builds trust.

”

Junior consultant from a Medium Independent design consultancy

Create a dialogue through asking questions and listening actively

Acknowledge client’s expertise in the field

Initiating trust by **considering expectations from all stakeholders**

During this stage, gathering insights and the expectations of all stakeholders addresses how to integrate different viewpoints from the beginning of the project.

“

In a project we were initiated, we saw that the reporting team from the clients were accountable to many other people in the company. Some senior managers and even some people from the C-suite. The project was about creating a new value proposition, and it needed approval from a lot of stakeholders. We took the initiative to have one-on-one conversations with individuals beyond the reporting team, including managers and the senior stakeholders. These discussions **allowed us to shape the project according to senior managers' expectations**, mitigating the risk of delivering something that may not align with their vision. This initiative gave us as the consulting team more time to work on something that is aligned by all. We **identified not just the brief's pain points but also the reporting client's pain points that exists within their organization**. This way, we were able to build a proposition that we know would satisfy their senior management and present the reporting client in a good light.

”

Design consultant from a Large Independent design consultancy

Identify client's pain points and show care and concern for them and the project

Consider expectations of all the stakeholders of the project

Initiating trust with **personal engagement**

Taking the extra step to create personal engagement can significantly enhance the pre-kick off session.

“

Building trust goes beyond a purely professional context, but it doesn't necessarily require becoming best friends or attending brunches together. Striking a balance is essential. **Initiating conversations by getting to know each other on a more personal level can be highly effective**. Inquiring about their life, family, and weekend activities allows for a deeper connection beyond a client relationship, by understanding their likes and dislikes, which fosters a stronger bond. It sounds like small talk, but sometimes they really help too.

These small human nuances play a pivotal role in building trust. As trust develops, clients become more comfortable expressing their pain points and concerns freely. Demonstrating genuine concern and care for their difficulties further solidifies the trust-building process.

Ultimately, by fostering personal engagement and expressing authentic interest in clients' lives, we can create a more empathetic and connected atmosphere during the pre-kick off session.

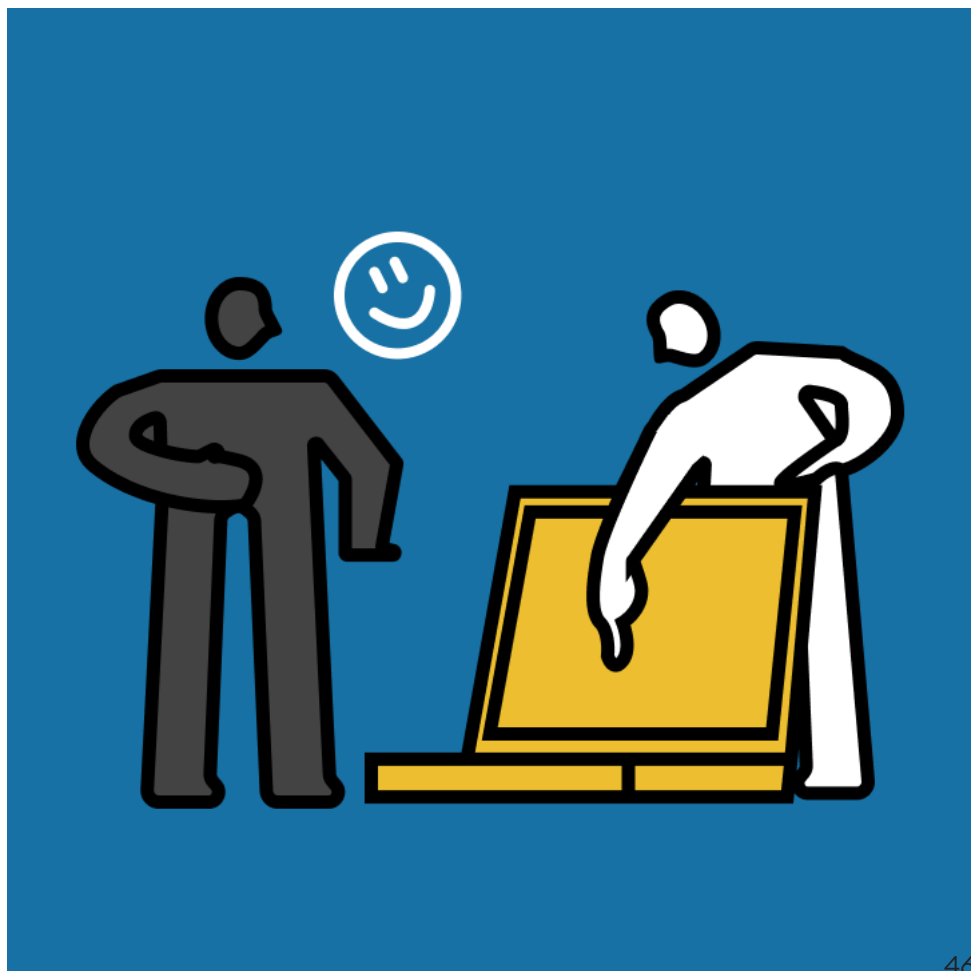
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Business designer from a Medium Independent design consultancy

Aim to build a personal relationship with the client

Initiating trust during project kick-off

Once you've gathered the preliminary information from the client, the next crucial step is to take it back and embark on a meticulous analysis of the data. This analysis frames a comprehensive presentation, providing you with the opportunity to showcase your understanding of the client's needs and requirements. It enables the client to gauge whether their input was accurately interpreted, fostering a sense of reassurance and confidence in your abilities. The presentation serves as a collaborative platform where both parties can engage in a constructive exchange of feedback. This two-way communication is instrumental in reaching a shared agreement.



Initiating trust by building a safe space

As consultants, it is our responsibility to create an environment where clients feel comfortable sharing their opinions, ideas, and concerns without fear of judgment or repercussions.

“

In a project I was involved in, we saw that if we speak openly about our motives and how we felt, the clients really opened up. There needs to be a boundary as to what you want to communicate honestly too. The clients need to know that you are well-intentioned, and that you will do what's best for them. Additionally we saw how keeping a standard expectation to reach that is agreed by both also shows how well-intentioned we are. To do this, one need to build a 'safe space' for clients. It allows for candid and transparent dialogue. Fostering this psychological safety encourages respectful disagreements, welcomes diverse perspectives and ensures that everyone's opinions are valued. For the project we were involved in, we sought out to have one-on-one conversations and talk to them openly on how they felt. Therefore, in a group discussion when we share the insights gathered from all the conversations, they felt heard. We also ensured to keep a role like facilitator or a moderator to ensure there is encouragement for everyone to voice out their opinions and no judgements or criticism is passed.

”

Designer from a Small Independent design consultancy

Build a safe space that allows people to be open and direct with their opinions

Communicate your intentions regarding the project openly and honestly

Initiating trust by coming to a shared understanding

As consultants, it is our duty to bring yourself and the client to a shared understanding of the goals, project approach, expectations and resources.

“

During the project kick-off meeting, we ensure to leave the meeting with a clear structure and understanding of the project. To do this, we give a clear structured presentation, keep some working sheets to jot down their concerns and immediately think of ways to incorporate it. If we feel like we need more time, we schedule for another kick-off meeting. We usually make the clients also sort of repeat what we mean so they we know what their interpretations are. Through open communication and active discussion, we avoid leaving the meetings with lingering confusion or unanswered questions. By fostering a shared understanding, the project can progress smoothly, ensuring that both you and the client are on the same page and working towards common goals. I say shared because it is not like only the client on board to accepting the outcomes of the discussions, but that we are also okay with it from the perspective of our timeframe and budget and resources.

”

Design Consultant from a Medium Independent design consultancy

Prioritize establishing a mutual and precise understanding for yourself and the client

Initiating trust by aligning meanings through language adoption and consistent communication

Adopting the language clients use, and maintaining consistent communication language helps to build trust with clients.

“

During a project with a food retailer, they tasked us with mapping a new value proposition based on industry trends. Before officially starting the project, we held a pre-kickoff session to discuss the project's outcomes and timeline. To showcase our expertise and direction, we conducted initial research and presented our findings in what we referred to as an “insight report.” However, we later discovered that the company called it a “findings report,” causing confusion and emphasizing the importance of precise language to achieve clarity.

Further, we ensured to communicate our interpretations of the brief to the clients. By rephrasing our understanding back to client, they were able to give feedback constructively. Our receptiveness to their feedback became a critical factor in building trust. By keeping the brief and approach as still ‘under construction’ we were able to incorporate their suggestions. This collaborative approach not only strengthened our relationship with the client but also allowed them to see the direct correlation between their requests and our analysis, further reinforcing their trust in our capabilities.

From the next meeting onwards, we kept to our word, and made changes in the way to present. We ensured to maintain consistency when addressing clients, may it be in reports, presentation of discussion structure and content.

”

Design Consultant from a Medium Independent design consultancy

Creating trust by adopting client's language to align meanings

Share your interpretations back to the client

Maintaining a consistent communication language

Plan with room for change and accept changes to your decisions

Initiating trust by [taking ownership for the project](#)

Taking ownership of the project and effectively setting boundaries and responsibilities with the client help a project be successful in trust-building.

“

We find it important to demonstrate a [sense of accountability and proactively in leading the project to achieve desired outcomes](#). Assuming ownership means being fully invested in the project's success, taking pride in the work, and being committed to delivering results that exceed the client's expectations. I was the junior design consultant for a brief on finding relevant trends that would address the new direction for the client to take in the future. The team had a project lead thereby making it evident that they need to take higher ownership for the project. But I did the same too. I shared my intentions to the client that I would take a great responsibility for project, meaning I would spend my time effectively and deliver quality results in timely fashion. I also shared my approach and how my time would be dedicated to the project. This way they know my seriousness to the project. This sense of ownership should be evident from the very beginning, starting with a clear understanding of the client's goals and requirements.

Another aspect that I saw help in building trust, was to demarcate responsibilities with the client as it [establishes a clear division of tasks and roles](#). When each party understands their specific responsibilities, it creates a more efficient and organized project workflow. Moreover, effective ownership and boundary-setting contribute to effective project management and risk mitigation.

”

[Junior Design Consultant from a Medium Independent design consultancy](#)

[# Take ownership of the project](#)

[# Set boundaries and demarcate responsibilities with the client](#)

Initiating trust by [sharing project structure and approach](#)

Starting from the kick-off session, the design process kicks into gear with a well-framed research question. Although the design process itself may be intricate and unstructured, clients expect to see a clear and organized project approach.

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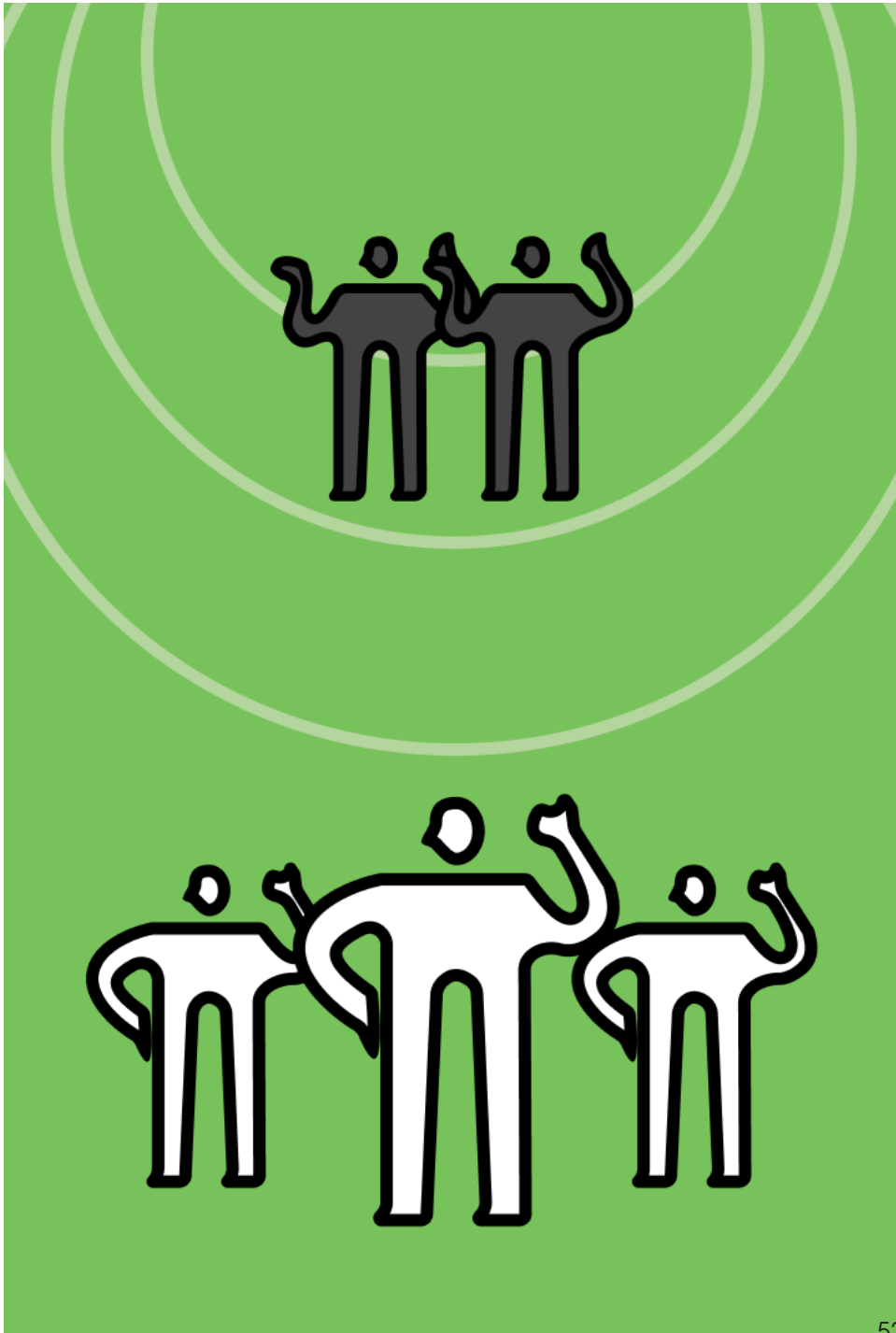
In the project approach, we take the time to [carefully define the methods we will use and provide a clear overview to our clients](#). Each method is accompanied by a brief description, outlining its purpose and the anticipated outcomes. We delve into the details of each method, for instance, if we're conducting interviews, we explain the number of people we plan to interview and the rationale behind this decision. Our aim is to help clients understand the reasoning behind every step we take.

When it comes to market research, we explain the specific activities involved, such as competitor analysis and trend research. By being transparent about our approach, we instil confidence in our clients that the project is in capable hands. We reassure them that the end result will align with their expectations. Simultaneously, we emphasize the dynamic nature of the process, acknowledging that the initial brief may evolve based on the insights we gather from the research.

”

[Designer from a Small Independent design consultancy](#)

[# Give the client a structure of the project process](#)



Developing the trustful relationship

With the initiation of a trusting relationship, the client's trust in you as a consultant is inherent, given that you will be working on their project. Now, it is your responsibility to deliver and exceed their expectations. Building trust is an ongoing process that gradually strengthens over time. While the design process is essential, it might not always provide the utmost clarity therefore additional layers of trust-building actions are necessary.

Developing trust by following through

In addition to specific actions tailored to trust formation, some general principles can be applied across various contexts. Following through and admitting mistakes are discussed here and the next page.

“

When a consultant makes a commitment or promise to a client, they are essentially setting expectations for the client's experience throughout the project. Delivering on these promises consistently is a clear demonstration of reliability and credibility.

To begin, it is crucial for consultants to set realistic and achievable promises from the outset. Over-promising and under-delivering can quickly erode trust and damage the consultant-client relationship. Therefore, it's essential to communicate clearly and honestly about what the consultant can realistically achieve and to manage client expectations accordingly. Once the promises are made, the consultant must be diligent in following through on each commitment. Consistency is key.

In situations where unforeseen challenges arise that may hinder the consultant's ability to fulfil promises, transparent communication is crucial.

”

Program Manager from an Acquired design consultancy

#Following through with kept promises and fulfilling expectations

Developing trust by admitting mistakes

“

Admitting mistakes truthfully and taking responsibility for them is a crucial aspect of building trust in any professional relationship. When a consultant acknowledges their mistakes, it shows honesty, transparency, and accountability, which are all key components of trust-building. Instead of trying to cover up errors or deflect blame, a consultant who admits their mistakes demonstrates integrity and a genuine commitment to finding solutions.

However, admitting mistakes alone is not enough. Equally important is the consultant's willingness to create an action plan to rectify those mistakes. Clients want to see that their consultant is not only aware of the problem but also actively working towards resolving it. Developing a clear and practical action plan shows the client that the consultant is taking the necessary steps to address the issue and prevent it from recurring in the future. Moreover, the action plan should include measures to prevent similar mistakes from happening again. This proactive approach reassures the client that the consultant is committed to continuous improvement and is actively learning from their errors

”

Senior design consultant from an Acquired design consultancy

Admit mistakes truthfully and create an action plan to rectify it

Developing trust during problem finding phase of project

The discovery phase of the design process is inherently dynamic and multifaceted, encompassing interactions with customers, market analysis, competition assessment, etc. Solving a problem that isn't clearly defined yet necessitates remaining open-minded about potential findings, which can create a sense of uncertainty and anxiety for clients.

To foster creativity and explore radical ideas, divergence is essential. This requires clients to trust in consultant's expertise and methods, allow navigating uncharted territories together. Encouraging clients to share their opinions and actively participate in the process enriches the exchange of information and ideas, ultimately shaping the project more effectively. During this phase, building trust primarily revolves around being present for the client and keeping them well-informed.



Developing trust with regular updates and consistent workflow

In addition to specific actions tailored to trust formation, some general principles can be applied across various contexts. Following through and admitting mistakes are discussed here and the next page.

“

Regular check-in moments with the client play a vital role in maintaining transparency and collaboration. Typically, we schedule update meetings once a week or every two weeks, ensuring the client remains informed and actively contributes to the project's progress. If necessary, we encourage clients to dedicate more time or adopt a collaborative working approach to facilitate meaningful interactions and decision-making.

A project I was involved in exemplifies this approach. Given the client team's limited availability, we established a distant working arrangement. To ensure effective communication and engagement, we implemented regular check-ins designed to foster meaningful conversations. During these meetings, we discussed the research findings and encouraged the client to ask numerous questions. This allowed us to gain insight into their thought processes and tailor our approach accordingly.

Presenting the findings to the client follows a consistent standard. Whether supported by visuals, well-documented, or enriched with quotations and data screenshots, the materials always meet a high standard of quality. By setting clear expectations for communication, presentation, and deliverables at the outset, we strive to maintain consistency and reliability throughout the project.

”

Design consultant from a Large Independent design consultancy

Grab opportunities for frequent meaningful and collaborative engagements with the client

Have regular check-in moments

Maintain a consistent and standardized workflow for achieving project expectations

Developing trust by **argumenting decisions and using methods**

Using some design methods, tools or canvases helps structure thinking for clients. It makes data tangible to see. Additionally, argumenting decisions shows the thought process that helped arrive to the current state.

“

The client often lacks awareness of the research process, including the data gathering methods and the insights we aim to uncover. In some cases, junior designers take charge of content creation and client communication, making it crucial to **effectively articulate our decisions**. I recall a project where two senior designers, including myself, had other pressing priorities, leaving a junior designer to handle client interactions. The client was demanding and imposed tight time constraints, resulting in inadequate communication of findings from our side and many uncertainties on their part.

Reflecting on this experience, I realized the importance of equipping junior designers with the skills to present clear points and well-argued explanations. Using visuals, graphs, or concise statement cards from the research can significantly improve communication. Employing **method templates** like empathy maps or jobs-to-be-done canvases allows us to convey information more effectively to the client.

Another key aspect is **transparently communicating any decisions** that deviate from the initial brief. In another project, we found that the original brief served as a hypothesis that no longer aligned with our research findings. We had to convey to the client that a shift in direction was necessary. By providing convincing arguments for the change, we allowed the client to make an informed decision. In the design process, changing the brief can be common, making it **essential to approach such modifications constructively and honestly with the client**.

”

Senior design consultant from a Large Independent design consultancy

Argument decisions properly

Articulate negative decisions in a constructive manner and deliver assertively

Be transparent in communication and disclose information in an effective format

Using methods and tools to create a shared mental model

Developing trust by **being a guiding partner**

An example highlighting the importance of being a guiding partner for the client.

“

Navigating uncertainty in interactions is crucial, as the perception of questions can vary depending on the individual you're communicating with. A question may not always be seen as seeking a solution; it could be interpreted as a sign of insecurity, which can impact trust. The challenge lies in finding a balance between feeling secure in asserting oneself while acknowledging uncertainties in the situation.

To illustrate this, imagine being in the middle of a jungle with your guide during a rainy and foggy chaos. If the guide admits, "I don't know what we're going to do," trust may waver. However, if the guide approaches you with confidence and says, **"We're in a difficult situation, but let's go through here because I believe it's the best way to go,"** the situation is perceived differently. It becomes a matter of attitude rather than the process itself.

Finding the right balance of confidence and vulnerability in interactions is essential to building trust. Demonstrating belief in your decisions while acknowledging the challenges fosters trust with others. It's like navigating the unpredictable jungle; a combination of confidence and openness helps build a trusting relationship with those you interact with.

”

Design consultant from a Large Independent design consultancy

Be the guiding partner who regularly assures the end goal for the client

Developing trust by taking in client's perspectives

Client's can be considered as the expert in their field, therefore, taking their feedback seriously and incorporating them helps in developing trust.

“

The project revolves around the clients, as it is ultimately meant for them to implement in their company. Understanding their perspectives and approaching solutions from their point of view holds immense importance. Engaging in discussions with clients, presenting results, and seeking their feelings about the findings is crucial. Delving into their feedback and asking detailed questions helps gain clarity on their perspectives. Sometimes, clients may initially offer vague responses, like “it’s just not working for us.” In such cases, proactively seeking more information and providing a feedback template can be beneficial.

The template could include asking them to specify the problem, explaining why it’s an issue, and suggesting how they envision a solution. This approach ensures that the feedback you receive is actionable, giving you a clear direction for meeting their expectations. Throughout this feedback-gathering process, it’s essential for you, as a consultant, to maintain a light-hearted attitude while taking their input. When clients provide feedback, they expect it to be implemented as requested.

”

Design consultant from a Medium Independent design consultancy

- # Be open to feedback through constructive dialogue to create change
- # Take the client’s perspectives to consideration and empathize with their problems

Developing trust by keeping a flexible approach to work

All aspects would not be possible to discuss in the project kick-off. When new information is found and changes need to be made, keeping a flexible approach to work is useful.

“

From the initial stages of the project proposal to the kick-off, certain aspects may have been outlined, but not explored in great detail. Take, for instance, a project I was involved in where we initially planned to interview a specific number of people, expecting to gather the necessary information and patterns. However, as we progressed, we discovered a diverse range of personas within the primary target audience. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the context, additional interviews were required. This highlights the need for a flexible approach to work, allowing for adjustments when unexpected details emerge.

In response to these discoveries, we promptly informed the clients and discussed potential solutions. In this instance, we had planned buffer days to handle such situations. The clients provided valuable input, suggesting a focus on two personas. This adaptive and collaborative approach helped accommodate the changes seamlessly.

Throughout the design process, new data and insights may surface, which can potentially alter the project’s direction. As a responsible consultant, it is essential to keep these developments in mind and communicate them accurately to the clients. Embracing flexibility and maintaining transparent communication ensures that the project stays on track despite unforeseen shifts, ultimately leading to a successful outcome.

”

Senior consultant from a Medium Independent design consultancy

- # Explore specific expectations in detail as the relationship develops
- # Keep a flexible work approach to accommodate for new change

Developing trust by updating other stakeholders in a timely manner

Findings from research can show significant insights into the project direction. As this marks the possible way forward, other stakeholders need to be updated.

“

During the problem finding phase, it's common for the initial project brief to undergo reframing. For instance, we might start with the intention of building a product for widespread use, but research reveals the benefits of targeting a specific group initially. In such situations, it's crucial to **keep all stakeholders informed**, not only the reporting client team but also senior management and other relevant parties. Timely updates are vital, as delays can lead to potential problems. By communicating changes promptly, stakeholders have the opportunity to provide feedback and assess factors like budget, viability, and feasibility. It also allows them to align the project with their values and objectives. Updating stakeholders can be achieved through large meetings with the reporting clients, as well as through email exchanges, though the latter might not always lead to productive discussions.

Maintaining transparent and regular communication during this phase is essential for garnering support, ensuring alignment, and making informed decisions. By involving all relevant stakeholders in the process, potential issues can be addressed proactively, leading to smoother project progress and successful outcomes.

”

Design consultant from a Large Independent design consultancy

Keep other stakeholders of the client's organization informed in a timely fashion

Developing trust during idea finding phase of project

Once a new design direction is reframed and set, the specific outcome is not yet defined. The idea finding phase aims to explore various potential solutions to the problem at hand. Depending on the client's capabilities and preferences, some ideas may be considered for further pursuit. However, when the space for ideas is vast and possibilities are endless, the process can become disorganized and complex. Despite the challenges, the exciting aspect is the increased client involvement. The following stories delve into this further to provide better insights.



Developing trust by using design methods

During this crucial phase, collaboration with the client plays a vital role in fostering creativity and idea generation.

“

If the client is not actively involved, it's good to persuade them to join the idea generation process. Their input is valuable in unleashing creative freedom and expanding the breadth of ideas with their expertise of the field. However, clients may face challenges when stepping into this phase, particularly if they are non-designers accustomed to critical thinking.

To address this, we utilized various design tools like mind mapping and post-it brainstorming. These tools empowered them to brainstorm with us, resulting in a wealth of enthusiastic ideas. We noticed that non-designers tended to quickly judge ideas, hindering open expression. To overcome this obstacle, we fostered a non-judgmental environment, encouraging free-flowing creativity.

We implemented the “6 thinking hats” technique after the brainstorming session, assigning specific roles to each participant. This approach enabled them to view the ideas from different perspectives, being critical or expanding on them.

The structured use of these tools not only facilitated idea generation but also provided a clear roadmap for progress. The clients could easily see the project's direction, understand the problem-solving process, and actively contribute to the project's success. Embracing a collaborative and supportive environment during the idea generation phase enhances creativity, strengthens client relationships, and drives the project towards innovative solutions.

”

Senior design consultant from a Large Independent design consultancy

Grab opportunities for frequent meaningful and collaborative engagements with the client

Using methods and tools to create a shared mental model

Developing trust with positive reinforcements

Embracing feedback creates opportunities for improvement and demonstrates a willingness to adapt and grow. In the process of engaging in constructive dialogue, positive reinforcement plays a crucial role.

“

When clients provide valuable input or actively collaborate in problem-solving, acknowledging their contributions and expressing appreciation is essential. Positive reinforcement reinforces their confidence in the design consultancy, making them feel valued and appreciated as active partners in the process. Furthermore, it creates a culture of openness and receptiveness to feedback fosters an environment where clients feel comfortable sharing their thoughts.

”

Business Designer from a Medium Independent design consultancy

Be open to feedback through constructive dialogue to create change

Boost client's confidence on the consultancy through positive enforcements

Developing trust by reviewing the project progress

Showing clients the progress of the project, by highlighting accomplishments and key decisions taken reassures the client where they have reached.

“

As part of our practice, we make it a point to celebrate. During presentations, we provide a brief recap of all the developments that have taken place, allowing the client to see the substantial distance we've covered together. We also take time to appreciate the progress made so far, so the team is motivated for the rest of the project process. This approach instils a sense of reassurance and progress in the clients. In one of the projects I was involved in, we witnessed how the clients derived genuine satisfaction when they realized the journey we had undertaken from the project's inception to its current status. The design process can be complex and at times disorganized, making it challenging to maintain a clear sense of direction. However, by taking the time to highlight achievements and reassure the client of their importance to the project, we not only benefit them but also gain insight into the remarkable progress we've accomplished thus far.

”

Junior consultant from a Medium Independent design consultancy

Regularly review past successes to reassure the trustor and reaffirm that the project is progressing smoothly

Developing trust by creating tangible representations

Sometimes bringing a concept to life even in the most roughest format helps clients envision the idea better.

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Creating tangible representations doesn't necessarily have to be physical; it can also involve diagrams, digital prototypes, or even using Lego to generate ideas. For instance, in one of our projects, we conducted a brainstorming session with the client where we created drawings of different directions on sheets and placed them on the floor. The session allowed the clients to utilize the space to map out and position ideas in a way that made sense together. This interactive and tangible approach helped the client gain better clarity and actively participate in sharing their opinions. Even seemingly simple techniques like this can significantly enhance client engagement and understanding during the design process.

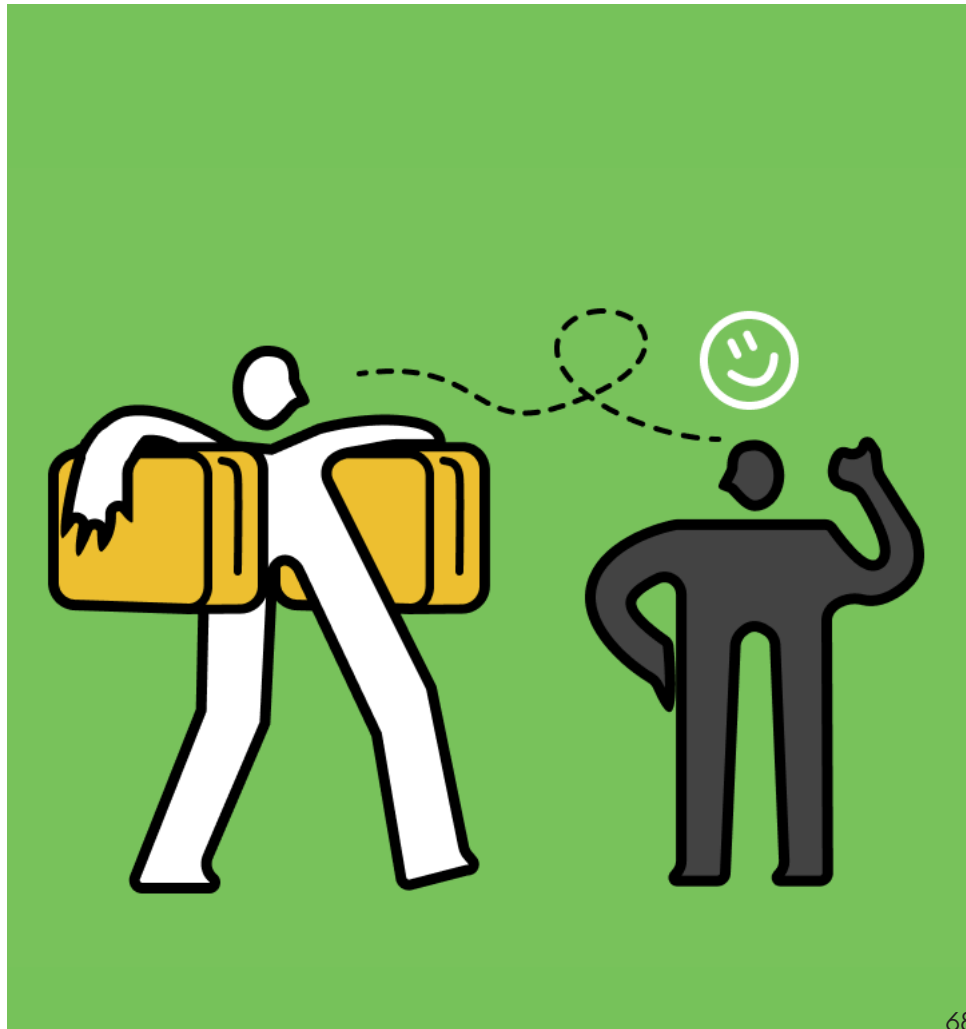
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Designer from a Small Independent design consultancy

Making an idea or concept tangible for the client

Developing trust during solution packaging phase of project

As the project reaches its conclusion, and the concept is ready to be delivered, maintaining momentum is crucial. The concept, which they requested as deliverables, must be submitted at the expected standard they anticipate. Many a times, the phase would go through testing and iterations, which can essentially use the same actions as mentioned in the idea finding phase.



Developing trust with language adoption and argued decisions

An example highlighting the importance of adopting to the client organization's language

“

To ensure a smooth and satisfying project completion, the final delivery should address several key aspects. One crucial element is a well-argued presentation of the concept itself, explaining how it was developed, why it was chosen, and detailing its potential for success and growth. As a consultant, it is essential to showcase the concept's viability, feasibility, and desirability, which are insights gathered throughout the design process.

In a recent project, we delivered both a research report and a pitch deck, along with a detailed technical report. This combination of deliverables allowed the client to gain a comprehensive understanding of the concept and its potential impact. We also gave a significant importance to talk about the desirability of the concept. Since the project primarily revolved around user-centricity, it was important to show that their future customers would use what we proposed. Naturally, the specific deliverables will vary based on the client's requirements, but the key remains in effectively arguing the decisions made and showcasing the concept's impact.

Furthermore, when presenting the deliverables, adapting the language and terminology to match the client's preferences and industry jargon is highly beneficial. This alignment facilitates better comprehension for the client and expedites the implementation of the proposed solution. Moreover, this approach portrays the consultant as credible and capable of delivering high-quality results, further enhancing the client's trust in the partnership

”

Design Consultant from a Medium Independent design consultancy

Argument decisions properly

Adapt yourself and the work to fit to the client's vocabulary

Developing trust with transparent communication and quality results

An example highlighting the importance of transparently sharing information and meeting some quality standards

“

Transparency is key when presenting deliverables. It is essential to showcase all information in a progressive and well-structured manner, highlighting the details that hold importance to the client. Keep the presentation concise while clearly connecting sections and explaining the reasoning behind the decisions made. Adhering to established standards and striving for the expected quality results is paramount. These standards could include specific metrics set by either yourself or the institution, such as meeting predetermined timelines or delivering a certain level of detail.

In one of our projects, our primary goal was to ensure that the deliverables contained all the necessary information, saving the client from having to conduct further analysis. We aimed to provide them with comprehensive materials that they could directly share with the agency responsible for developing the branding touchpoints based on our strategy. To achieve this, we included a template that the next agency could work with, encompassing mood boards, content framing, and examples of visuals aligned with the colour scheme. This approach not only streamlined the process but also empowered the client to move forward swiftly with the next steps, confident in the materials they had in hand.

”

Junior Design Consultant from a Medium Independent design consultancy

Be transparent in communication and disclose information in an effective format

Keep concrete standards of delivery to achieve quality results



Maintaining a trustful relationship

As one reaches the end of the project, it's crucial to wrap things up on a positive note. Maintaining good professional conduct not only ensures a smooth closure but also sets the stage for potential future collaborations with the client on other projects. While it doesn't guarantee a long-lasting relationship, it does leave a lasting impression that can be beneficial down the road.

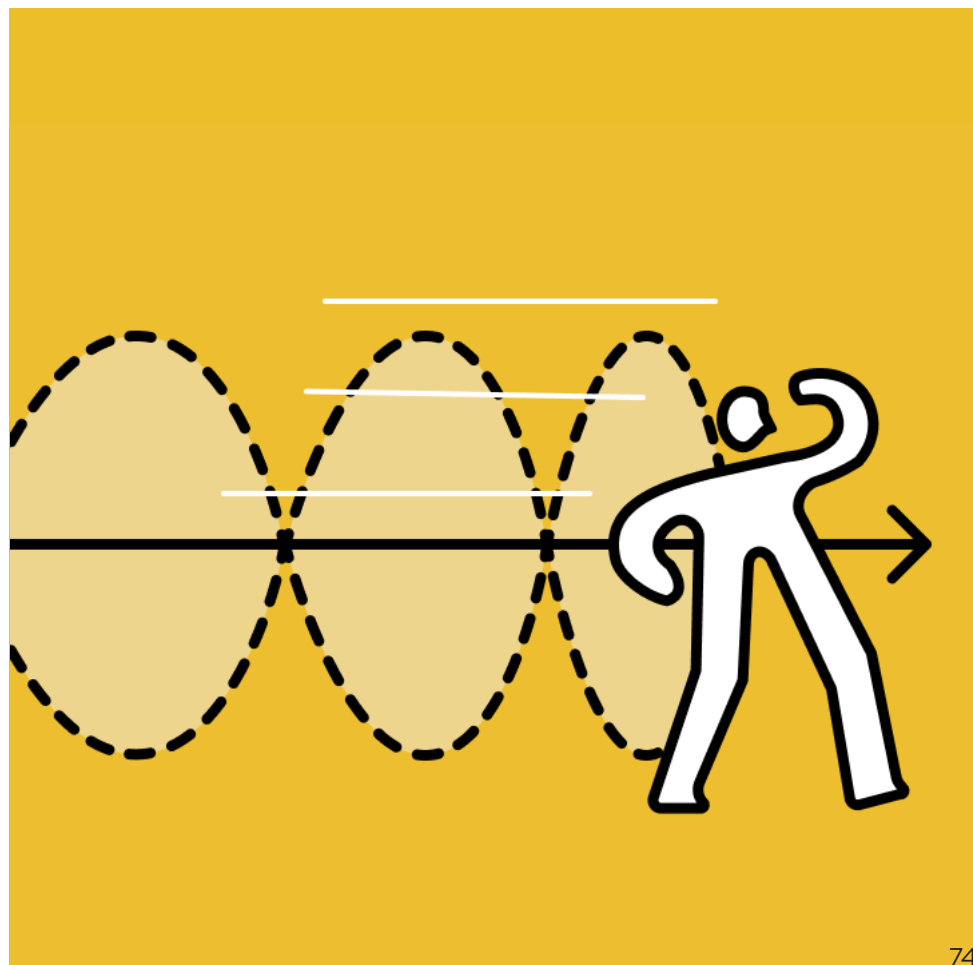
When working with longer-term clients, the dynamics are quite different. Due to the considerable amount of time spent together, the relationship tends to be more bonded. This may lead to lasting connections and even the opportunity to consider some of them as friends.

On the other hand, when dealing with shorter projects, leaving with a positive impression can make a difference if encountering each other again.

Maintain the relationship at the end of the process

The final phase of the design process entails the delivery of the project. At this stage, all the essential work has been completed, and the client is fully aware of what they will be receiving. As a consultant, you might find yourself swiftly transitioning to another project that takes higher priority. Consequently, the attention and enthusiasm for the previous project might dwindle, leading to a lack of momentum and a less-than-ideal conclusion.

Even though the project's duration may be brief, leaving a positive impression can have a lasting impact and enhance future collaborations



Maintaining trust by involving stakeholders and informal engagement

An example that exemplifies the purpose of involving stakeholders and having some informal engagement.

“

When we reach the end of a project, it's a prime opportunity to gather all the stakeholders including senior personnel involved for the outcome delivery. They require a more detailed flow of information with a structured presentation briefly recapping previous topics and delving deeper into the concept.

It's crucial to articulate and justify decisions during the presentation. This helps the stakeholders understand the process and instils confidence. We usually add 10% of something new that could excite the stakeholders. This could entail providing additional work that goes beyond their expectations or revealing new details in the project that they haven't seen before. By infusing this element of surprise or novelty, they are engaged their overall experience with the project delivery is enhanced.

An essential aspect that I've found to be quite impactful is to highlight the achievements of the reporting client's team within their organization. This doesn't involve sugar-coating anything, but rather expressing genuine appreciation for their active involvement and dedication throughout the project. It not only leaves a positive impression of you as a consultants but also showcases the client's team members as dedicated participants in external projects.

Furthermore, if the budget allows, organizing an informal get-together over drinks or a fun activity can be a fantastic way to end the project on a positive note. In cases where in-person meetings are not feasible, conducting a closure call and requesting feedback on how the project handling could be improved are excellent alternatives to ensure proper closure.

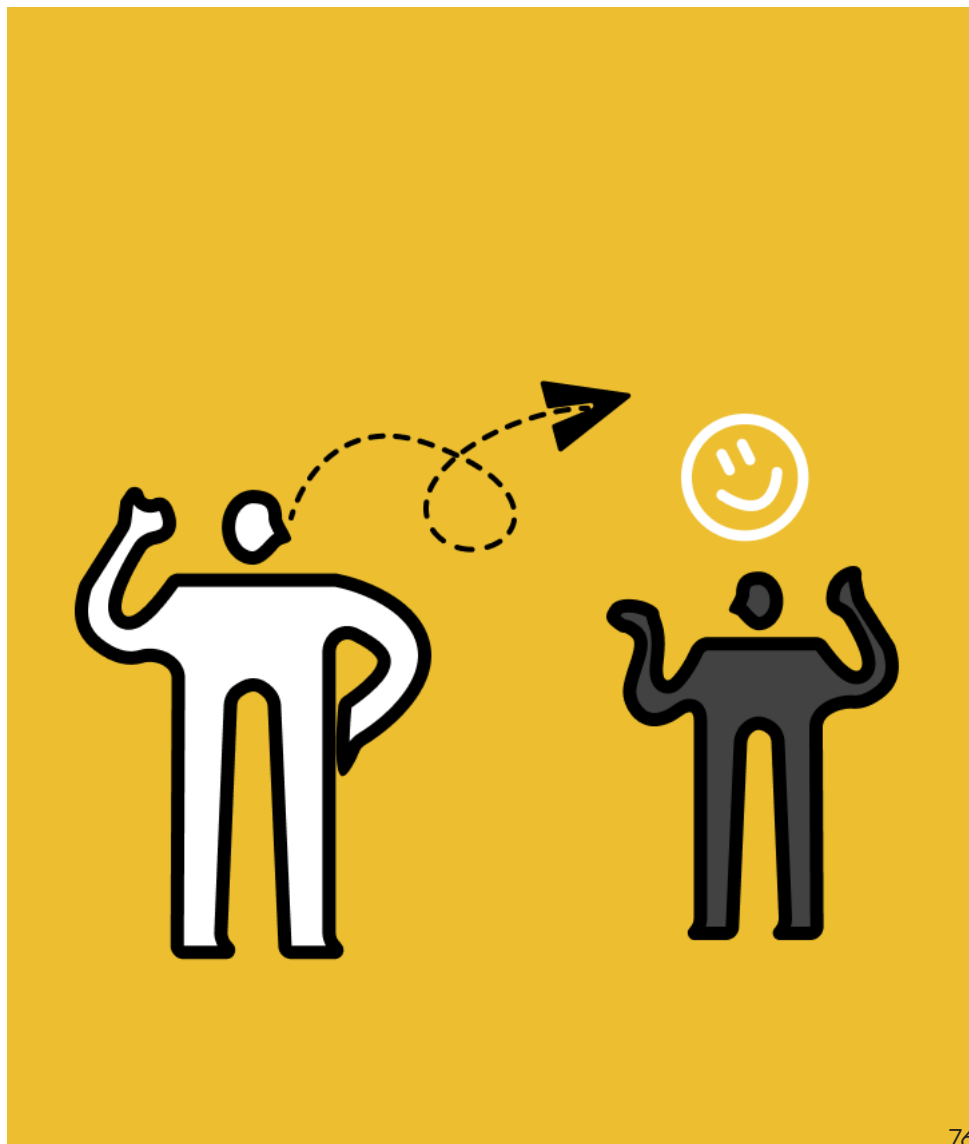
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Designer from an Acquired design consultancy

- # End the project on a positive note through informal engagement
- # Create a positive perception of the reporting client
- # Involve and update other stakeholders in an effective manner

Maintaining relationship after project.

What happens after the project ends? Short-term projects may pose challenges in maintaining individual relationships with clients. However, for long-term projects, the bonds tend to be stronger, increasing the chances of lasting connections.



Maintaining trust by **keeping in touch**

A personal touch can help strengthen the rapport and leave a lasting impression, even if ongoing individual maintenance is not feasible. By carefully handling each project and proactively nurturing client relationships, a solid foundation for potential future collaborations and maintain a positive network within the professional realm.

“

Let me tell you about my experience with a reporting manager from the client's side. We were in close contact during the project, helping each other understand the project context better. Unfortunately, the project took a turn for the worse; we focused on the wrong area, and contract issues added to the mix. Sadly, the reporting manager lost her job due to the debacle, and it ended on a sour note.

But here's the surprising part. Despite the project's failure, she still stayed in touch with me. We connected on LinkedIn and **even exchanged casual check-ins**. I shared interesting articles related to the topic we worked on together, and she saw my genuine interest and dedication. It became evident that she trusted me and believed in what I was doing.

Even after she moved to another company, our connection remained strong. It paid off when **her new company became our new client** because of that solid connection we maintained. You know what I learned from this experience? Keeping that personal contact and taking time to share valuable information post-project can make a huge difference. It shows how involved you were with the project and builds trust. I kept in touch with her to ask about the implementation of the project. They remained a long-term client for us by seeing our proactive participation in the project. So, never underestimate the power of post-project connections!

”

Business Designer from a Medium Independent design consultancy

- # Sharing information that would interest them post project completion
- # Be open to assisting them for future endeavours
- # Keep in touch by following up with implementation updates



I hope the book illustrated the challenging nature of earning someone's trust and highlights that trust-building is an ongoing and continuous process. The mentioned narratives provide insights into the practices of experienced consultants in building trust. While building trust is a common concept understood by many, trial and error might not be the best approach when working with clients. It is essential to have a well-founded understanding of how to build trust effectively to foster successful client relationships. For junior designers, handling clients can be challenging, making it even more crucial to reflect on their own working methods, identify what works well, and implement these strategies in future interactions. But it is good to remember that there is not one formula for building trust. The competency for this is gained by experience and learning what works best for you and for the other.

Apart from these aspects of trust, there are more other nuances to this topic, like distrust, mistrust, losing trust and regaining trust that should be looked into. It is good to keep in mind cultural differences and how this can depend on demographics.

I trust that this book has shed light on the significance of trust and its practical implementation. My hope is that it equips you with valuable tools to develop stronger relationships with your clients, ultimately enhancing your professional journey.

Good luck with making trustful relationships!

Glossary

Initiating the trustful relationship

Initiating the trustful relationship at the project acquisition phase.

- # Show previous work and experiences
- # Be more responsive to client's needs
- # Communicate your intentions regarding the project openly and honestly
- # Setting strong but healthy boundaries on projects
- # Maintaining a consistent communication language

Initiating the trustful relationship at the pre and during project proposal phase.

- # Clarify expectations through transparent and flexible communication.
- # Ensure a legal binding to hold accountability for trustee and reduce fear for trustor
- # Plan with room for change and be open to change in your decisions
- # Clarify expectations through transparent and flexible communication.

Initiating trust during project pre-kick-off

- # Gain advantage through experience and/or personal interest in the client's project domain
- # Additional efforts spent for client is appreciated
- # Create a dialogue through asking questions and listening actively
- # Acknowledge client's expertise in the field
- # Identify client's pain points and show care and concern for them and the project
- # Consider expectations of all the stakeholders of the project
- # Aim to build a personal relationship with the client

Initiating trust during project kick-off

- # Build a safe space that allows people to be open and direct with their opinions
- # Communicate your intentions regarding the project openly and honestly
- # Prioritize establishing a mutual and precise understanding for yourself and the client
- # Creating trust by adopting client's language to align meanings
- # Share your interpretations back to the client
- # Maintaining a consistent communication language
- # Plan with room for change and accept changes to your decisions
- # Take ownership of the project
- # Set boundaries and demarcate responsibilities with the client
- # Give the client a structure of the project process

Developing the trustful relationship

Following through with kept promises and fulfilling expectations

Admit mistakes truthfully and create an action plan to rectify it

Developing trust during problem finding phase of project

- # Grab opportunities for frequent meaningful and collaborative engagements with the client
- # Have regular check-in moments
- # Maintain a consistent and standardized workflow for achieving project expectations
- # Argument decisions properly
- # Using methods and tools to create a shared mental model
- # Be transparent in communication and disclose information in an effective format
- # Articulate negative decisions in a constructive manner and deliver assertively
- # Be the guiding partner who regularly assures the end goal for the client
- # Be open to feedback through constructive dialogue to create change
- # Take the client's perspectives to consideration and empathize with their problems
- # Explore specific expectations in detail as the relationship develops
- # Keep a flexible work approach to accommodate for new change
- # Keep other stakeholders of the client's organization informed in a timely fashion

Developing trust during idea finding phase of project

- # Grab opportunities for frequent meaningful and collaborative engagements with the client
- # Using methods and tools to create a shared mental model
- # Be open to feedback through constructive dialogue to create change
- # Boost client's confidence on the consultancy through positive enforcements
- # Regularly review past successes to reassure the trustor and reaffirm that the project is progressing smoothly
- # Making an idea or concept tangible for the client

Developing trust during solution packaging phase of project

- # Argument decisions properly
- # Adapt yourself and the work to fit to the client's vocabulary
- # Be transparent in communication and disclose information in an effective format
- # Keep concrete standards of delivery to achieve quality results

Maintaining a trustful relationship

Maintain the relationship at the end of the process

- # End the project on a positive note through informal engagement
- # Create a positive perception of the reporting client
- # Involve and update other stakeholders in an effective manner

Maintaining relationship after project

- # Sharing information that would interest them post project completion
- # Be open to assisting them for future endeavours
- # Keep in touch by following up with implementation updates



References

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Although the subject of trust is broad, this book concentrates on the trust that exists between a design consultant and a client, or anyone external to a firm. In this context, there is less research and weightage given to the subject of trust. But why is this significant? Design consulting follow design process that non-designers may find difficult to comprehend. As a result, this book walks you through the process of initiating, developing, and maintaining trust in a project relationship that uses design process. The book's narratives of proficient designers' experiences encourage reflection on your own working methods, which may include collaborating with clients on group projects at university or creating case studies, among other possibilities.