



BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS: WHAT SHOULD THEY LOOK LIKE?

Travelling across the province and meeting with various forest industry groups, you soon realize there are remarkably similar discussions taking place across the province. As someone who's listened to these conversations, I realize they are going on between forestry operators on the coast, truckers in the Interior, silviculture contractors in the north and every combination in between.

The business owners doing the talking all want to improve their performance and achieve better results. However, they are all confronted with a common issue. And it is not just a sustainable rate—that's a different story. There's a common feeling among these business owners that they do not have a good relationship with their customers. Looked at individually, you could write-off each conversation as a one-off situation or a disgruntled operator. But

when the same conversation is taking place in most regions of the province and occurs over and over again, I don't believe it is an isolated or localized issue.

The crux of the issue for these business owners is how unhealthy and counterproductive their interactions are with their customers. Through debate and discussion, the focus eventually lands on this question: What makes for a solid, productive and mutually beneficial working relationship?

So what does a healthy business relationship look like? Or, at least, what is it supposed to look like? Obviously, within a customer-supplier relationship the expectation isn't that it is all give by one party and all take by the other. If a relationship continued in that fashion, it would eventually prove unsustainable and would fail in time.

There are numerous articles on business relations and customer-supplier interactions. However, for me the key factors that apply to the forestry industry and should be considered are the following.

Respect

Respectful dialogue and negotiations are considerate, straightforward and tactful. People who respect one another value each other's opinions and contributions. They will consider changing their minds in response to what the other says. Respect is especially important in challenging situations, as it can help individuals focus on problem solving. Where there is not respect for individual efforts and contributions, relationships break down and emotions take over.

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Communication

For communication to be effective the type of interaction must suit the message being delivered. Critical types of communication—messages with potentially unclear meanings or emotional content—should be delivered face-to-face or, at a minimum, by telephone. These days I think there is an overdependence on communication technology such as emails and text messages. We must remember that several layers of communication are lost in an email—tone of voice, facial expression, body language—that can soften bad news or help explain a problem.

Another key part of communication is timeliness. Operations within the forest industry do not happen at the drop of a hat. Communication of objectives and goals needs to be done in a timely fashion to allow for efficient responses and for proper business planning.

Interrelatedness

At the end of the day, a customer-supplier relationship should provide mutual

benefits to both parties. This occurs when people understand the task at hand and understand how their work affects one another. If one of the parties in the relationship is not willing to consider mutual benefits in their planning, short-term or long-term, the ability to achieve good communication and respect will be difficult.

Independence

In a good relationship, the customer and supplier should be independent of each other. The supplier should be operating with clear and sufficient information from the customer to produce what is required in a timely fashion. However, the supplier should be operating independently and on their own to deliver to the specified product.

Trust

This is a basic premise. It is simply the expectation if you are going to do something, you do it. If you are promising to deliver something, you stand behind it. If this does not happen, then there is a short-

fall in respect, communication and interdependence and the entire relationship will fall apart.

Many may be chuckling to themselves as they read this and consider their own business relationships. And the fact that some will find this comparison humorous is actually sad. Sad because the business relationship they have with their customer or supplier is so far away from having any of the components discussed above. How does one go about changing the relationship you're in? That is a great question and one with no easy answer. However, without a change in the relationship, the supply chain is at risk. A risk none of us can afford to take! ♣

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