

Is This Your Profile?

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If you're a financial advisor (or if, like me, you serve them), would the following description fit you?

"Truly listens to the client, seeking to understand the client's world. Is authentically empathic. 'Gets' the client. Acts professionally...and then some."

I didn't make up these characteristics. They were among the core qualities of planners cited during a conversation I facilitated recently among members of FPA's Professional Advisory Council. I wanted to tap the wisdom of these experienced planners regarding the skills and qualities they believe are key to their success. I posed the following two positively-framed (aka: appreciative) questions:

1. *As an experienced financial planner (and possibly a business owner), what are the most important skills you have developed and deepened that contribute to your success? (I.e., if that skill or quality were absent or poorly developed, you would not be nearly as successful.)*
2. *Think about a great client relationship that you have: one that's successful by anyone's standards. What skills and qualities are you using in this relationship? What does the client appreciate and admire most about you and how you serve them? What do you do that matters most of the client, and to the relationship? And can you think of a "Tipping Point Moment" where the relationship deepened or got greater traction?*

A heartfelt conversation ensued; the kind where everyone is so engaged that it feels more like jazz than conversation. One participant became so absorbed she overstayed her intended departure time and almost missed her flight. Based on their contributions, I created the following "composite profile" of the successful financial planner. See if rings true. Does it sound like any planner you know? Does it sound like *you*? What would you add-delete-modify to make it fit you completely?

Listens with Openness and Curiosity: seeks to understand (rather than to judge, analyze, "fix" or change) the client's values, goals, and perspectives; also, listens to understand the meanings beneath the client's words; is fully present with the client (aka: refrains from silently rehearsing your response).

Empathy: senses what the client is feeling: is attuned to own bodily cues for clues about what client may be feeling -- but stays emotionally balanced. (*Note: recent neuroscience research shows that structures in the brain may be responsible for this kind of felt empathy for another person.*)

These first two qualities lead to a third:

"Gets" and Values the Client. includes a cognitive understanding, but also a deeper "felt sense" of who this person is, and cares about them (i.e., values their well-being). It's not unusual for clients to say to planners who deeply "get" them, *"You know more about me than my spouse."*

These skills and qualities lead to several specific behaviors, which were endorsed by all participants on the call:

Cultivates a Safe Environment: creates a place where clients feel safe and trusting. It includes many of the above aspects: authentic, non-judgmental listening; truly seeking to understand; inviting the client to disclose and explore personally important information that may be relevant to their financial plans.

Uses Coaching Skills: refrains from "selling" a solution or directing the client. Instead, acts like a coach, guiding the client to make the decision that's in their best interest.

Is "On Alert" 24/7: several said they are always thinking (and sometimes even dream) about their clients. Many noted that when they encounter information relevant to specific clients, they send it along with a brief *"Thought this would interest you"* note which shows the client that their planner cares about them and is committed to their well-being.

Is Open, Self-aware and Transparent: (i) is willing to say "I don't know (but I'll find out)" rather than fake it (ii) apologizes forthrightly when advisor or firm makes a mistake; (iii) delegates certain tasks to a team member (and establishes teams in the first place), either because advisor doesn't excel at the task or because delegation increases productivity (and serves as a developmental opportunity). One Council member even posts a *"Park Your Egos at the Door"* sign on the conference room; and (iv) in addition to knowing their own limits, has a secure understanding of the "sweet spots" in their skills, personal qualities, and experience base.

Acts Professionally, and Then Some: follows up in a timely way, gets the details right, always keeps promises. Moreover, goes *beyond* the extra mile, showing up for the client in ways beyond anything in a "normal" profile. One example: driving a client to chemotherapy appointments.

I love this profile. I like to think that in my better moments, I exemplify its characteristics. What about you? How does it correspond to how you see your own skills and qualities?

A Call to Action: Answer for yourself the two questions which I posed to the Council, and see what you learn. (If you'd like to discuss what you learn, email me at ed@edwardjacobson.com.) Also, consider starting a conversation using the two questions within your firm, your study group, and/or with other trusted colleagues. They'll be great conversations. Just be careful not to miss your flight.