

It's obvious

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Last week I was talking with a client and for some reason the topic turned toward janitorial services. The client was a little bit frustrated with their janitorial service. Things that they thought should be getting done on a regular basis were only accomplished haphazardly or were not getting done at all. They were feeling that they then needed to leave the workers specific notes about what they wanted cleaned that particular night.

Every time that a note was left, the work was done very well. However the longer we talked about the subject, the clearer it became that this was a sore spot for my client. We talked about replacing the janitorial service with another one but they didn't feel the service was bad enough to warrant replacement. At one point in the discussion, my client said, "Can't they see what needs to be done? It's obvious!" What was obvious to my client was clearly not obvious to the janitorial crew.

This statement struck unusually close to home for me. I have had some of these same conversations with my wife. She always sees a chore or something that needs to be done around the house and points it out to me. When I express my surprise that I didn't notice the issue before, she would become frustrated with my lack of "vision". What was obvious to her was certainly not obvious to me. As a side note, I believe I am NOT the only husband in this situation! I began to feel a little sorry for the janitorial crew of my client. But then I tried to put their situation into perspective. This was more than a household chore or fix-up, this was their livelihood.

As small business owners and managers we have a responsibility to our clients to not only see what they see, but to anticipate what they might be seeing in the future. Our job is to help make our client's lives easier, so that they see our company as a solution to their problems before they become problems. If we are teetering on the brink of satisfaction and frustration, it is a very dangerous place to be. If I was the janitorial company for my client I would be very grateful that they were taking the time to write me notes. But I wouldn't rely on those for very long.

They should be meeting with the client face to face to discuss not only what their requirements are for the job (what they call obvious) but also the higher expectations. Frankly they should be meeting with the client on a regular basis to not only make sure they are meeting all the requirements, but also to see what other opportunities are available. Regular meetings take time and energy, but almost always lead to long term, happy clients.

In an ideal world the client would now be writing notes of thanks, instead of notes of instruction. In an ideal world I would be able to see and act on all those jobs around the house that my wife sees that needs to be done. Obviously.

*Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.*