



BUSINESS BOOK Summaries

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Getting Naked

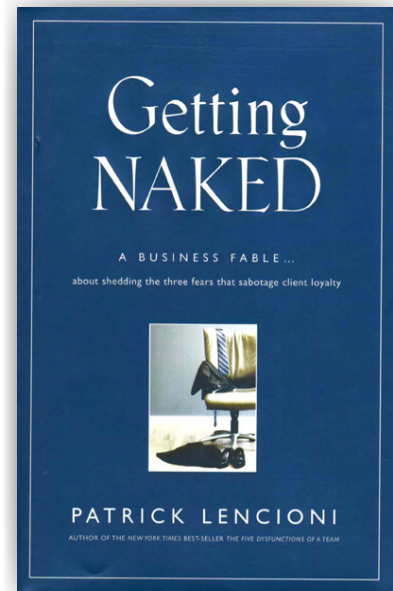
A Business Fable

Patrick Lencioni

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INTRODUCTION

Even though vulnerability is key to building deep and lasting relationships, it is not usually associated with success in business. Professionals who understand the value of vulnerability, however, are better equipped to build strong, lasting relationships with clients. In **Getting Naked**, Patrick Lencioni explains why vulnerability is a critical characteristic of service providers, and he demonstrates how embracing vulnerability can deliver unprecedented levels of client loyalty. Vulnerability allows for a level of service that is rare, giving service providers the opportunity for a tangible competitive advantage.

PART I: THE FABLE

Vulnerability is integral to building powerful personal and business relationships, although it is often undervalued and misunderstood. Service providers who are honest, humble, and selfless—the hallmarks

of vulnerability—can endear themselves to clients, encouraging their trust and dependence. Nonetheless, Lencioni points out that the idea of *showing* vulnerability—or the idea of “naked service”—continues to run counter to intuition and training.

Humans tend to perceive vulnerability as a weakness, and most business models do not suggest showing weakness. Naked service is therefore rare—and as a result, professionals who incorporate vulnerability into their business model may have a definitive competitive edge, as they can more effectively help their clients.

Lencioni introduces the book with a fable about a management consultant, Jack Bauer. Jack works for Kendrick and Black, a full-service management consulting firm that believes in presenting a polished front while always appearing to be in control. When Kendrick and Black purchases Lighthouse, a smaller

and newer firm that is nonetheless a strong competitor, Bauer must manage the new firm and develop a strategy for merging the two, each of which has a different approach to serving clients. Lighthouse relies on vulnerability and total transparency, while Kendrick and Black focuses on proving its competence and protecting its reputation for intellectual prowess.

After a close examination of the new firm, Bauer determines that the new firm has a shorter but stronger client list than anticipated; that their costs are higher than Kendrick and Black's because they use fewer junior consultants; and that their fees and their profits are also higher than Kendrick and Black's. Bauer also learns that Lighthouse consultants spend much more time on-site with their clients than the consultants at Kendrick and Black. All this information makes Lighthouse's success more of a puzzle—until Bauer joins the Lighthouse consultants on their sales calls and sees their client interaction firsthand.

At the first call to an established Lighthouse client (a restaurant chain), Bauer and the Lighthouse consultant review mock-ups of the new menus that the restaurant will begin using. The restaurant owner approves of the menu design, so Bauer is both surprised and embarrassed when the Lighthouse consultant informs the restaurant owner that the menus are wrong for the business and its desired reputation. The Lighthouse consultant is direct but polite, and completely unwavering. Bauer is even more surprised when the owner cheerfully agrees to approach the creative team for a new concept.

As Bauer accompanies the Lighthouse consultants on more calls, he notices other behaviors that at first glance appear unprofessional and amateur. Instead entering a first meeting armed with hours of research, custom reports, and slides on how to improve business, the Lighthouse consultants conduct very little research, instead asking questions and listening to the responses. The consultants also provide ideas and solutions to issues before learning if the prospective client will become a paying client.

What is most surprising to Bauer, however, is how many potential clients become paying clients – and how loyal they are to Lighthouse. The clients frequently refer other clients and sign Lighthouse on for additional work.

KEY CONCEPTS

The key to providing naked service can be boiled down to *vulnerability*: the ability to embrace uncommon levels of humility, selflessness, and transparency for the good of the client. In **Getting Naked**, Patrick Lencioni explains why vulnerability is a critical characteristic of service providers, and he demonstrates how embracing vulnerability can reward them with unprecedented levels of client loyalty.

Three fears stand in the way of providing naked service.

1. **Fear of losing the business:** Naked service providers are not overly concerned about losing a client, and they willingly put themselves in vulnerable positions in order to win trust.
2. **Fear of Being Embarrassed:** Naked service providers are focused on helping the client, so they are willing to ask questions and make suggestions that fall short of the mark.
3. **Fear of Feeling Inferior:** Naked service providers overcome their need to feel important in the eyes of their client.



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By the time Bauer is scheduled to present to Kendrick and Black, he is convinced that Lighthouse has developed a strong and compelling business model that would not fit into the culture at Kendrick and Black. He also feels that Kendrick and Black could benefit by adopting some of Lighthouse's practices.

In his presentation to the principals at Kendrick and Black, Bauer describes the style of Lighthouse consultants as "vulnerable." According to Bauer, the consultants have overcome three common fears that hold many back. The first is the **fear of losing the business**. Lighthouse consultants worry little about closing a deal or whether a client will continue working with them. Instead, the consultants focus on saying and doing whatever is in the client's best interest, not worrying about possible repercussions.

Second, Lighthouse consultants do not have a **fear of being embarrassed**. When in doubt, they speak up and ask questions or make suggestions. They also readily acknowledge mistakes and move on from them gracefully. Third, Lighthouse consultants do not have a **fear of feeling inferior**. They are willing to be humble, and they avoid putting their knowledge and expertise at the center of discussions with clients. They are not obsequious; they simply focus on the client rather than themselves.

This focus on the client and the client's issues—not on the expertise of the consultant and the firm—is a revolutionary idea for Kendrick and Black, though the firm decides not to embrace it. Instead, even though

Lighthouse is popular with its clients and is a strong, profitable competitor, Kendrick and Black decide to sell them. The idea of being vulnerable and of becoming a naked service provider runs too counterintuitive to their beliefs about what makes a good consultant and a good consulting firm.

There is no better way to earn a person's trust than by putting ourselves in a position of unprotected weakness and demonstrating that we believe they will support us.

PART II: THE MODEL

Lighthouse's model of overcoming fear is at the core of being a naked service provider, though it runs counter to assumptions that most businesspeople carry. It seems illogical that displaying vulnerability and not fearing embarrassment is a component of success; it is hard for many professionals to believe that they can make a strong showing to potential clients with naked service.

Naked service, however, is simply a service provider's willingness to be vulnerable – to embrace uncommon levels of humility, selflessness, and transparency for the good of a client. This concept is more difficult than it sounds, explains Lencioni, because those three qualities can be uncomfortable, and most people do not understand or welcome uncomfortable feelings. Most people strive to avoid awkward and painful situations, which Lencioni believes leads to the three fears that prevent the building of trust and loyalty with clients: *the fear of losing the business, the fear of being embarrassed, and the fear of feeling inferior.*

1.) Fear of Losing the Business – No service provider wants to lose clients, business opportunities, or revenue. However, this fear can actually damage a professional's ability to keep and increase business. Clients want to know that service providers are interested in and committed to helping them, and they want to believe that this interest is not driven solely by a perceived source of revenue.

In practice, naked service providers are not overly concerned about the possibility of losing a client, of being undercompensated, or of having their ideas misappropriated by a client. In fact, naked service providers willingly assume vulnerability in all three of these areas,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Lencioni is the president and founder of The Table Group and *The New York Times* best-selling author of eight books, including *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* and *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job*. His work has been featured in the *Harvard Business Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, and other business publications.

as they know that doing so will earn the trust of their clients. They understand that their actions will build goodwill, even if there are setbacks along the way.

Lencioni reminds readers that “clients can smell fear and are repelled by it. They are attracted to a service provider who will be honest and direct with them, even if it might jeopardize the relationship.”

2.) Fear of Being Embarrassed – No one likes making mistakes in public or enduring the scrutiny of spectators, especially when those spectators are paying for advice or counsel. The fear of being embarrassed is rooted in intellectual pride and apprehension about appearing ignorant; it is the natural result of a person’s desire to be considered smart and competent. Naked service providers are more concerned about helping a client, so they are willing to ask questions and make suggestions—even if those questions and suggestions turn out to be wrong.

Naked service providers will demonstrate high levels of accountability and admit to clients when they are wrong. This vulnerability is part of what convinces clients to trust naked service providers. The clients know that naked service providers will not hold back their ideas, and this transparency and modesty is appealing to them.

Ironically, the fear of losing the business actually hurts our ability to keep and increase business, because it causes us to avoid doing the difficult things that engender greater loyalty and trust with the people we are trying to serve.

3.) Fear of Feeling Inferior – Like the fear of being embarrassed, the fear of feeling inferior has roots in ego and pride. However, the fear of feeling inferior is about preserving a sense of importance and social standing relative to the client. It is natural for a service provider to want respect or admiration from the client, but as Lencioni points out, sometimes service providers forget that the word service “shares the same root meaning as servant and even subservience.”

True naked service providers overcome their need to feel important and sometimes purposefully relegate themselves to a lesser position. In other words, the naked service provider does whatever is necessary to help meet the client’s goals, even if the service pro-

vider’s interests must be overlooked. Clients come to trust and respect service providers who make themselves vulnerable in this way.

Naked service providers demonstrate their vulnerability by engaging in a variety of simple but powerful practices, all of which correspond to one or more of the three primary fears. It is important to understand and acknowledge these fears, and it is equally important to understand the specific principles that guide the actions that demonstrate naked service.

Fear of Losing the Business

There are four principles that the naked service provider can use to help overcome the fear of losing the business. They are:

1.) Always Consult Instead of Sell. Naked service providers use every sales situation to showcase the value of what they do. They begin by explaining what they would do and by working with the client to address business issues and concerns. Naked service providers do not worry that a potential client will take advantage of their generosity, because they believe that for every one who does, there are nine others who will appreciate their generosity. Potential clients will begin to see themselves as real clients well before they formally decide to become one.

In this way, sales situations become more enjoyable *service giveaways*. Service giveaways increase the service provider’s level of confidence much more than if they were simply trying to convince a potential client to make a decision. Naked service providers enter client meetings with the goal of finding a way to help the client in a meaningful way. Then, if the client does not hire them, they understand it is probably for the best—the potential client recognizes exactly what the service provider does and can therefore determine if it is a service they need.

2.) Give Away the Business. There are two practical applications for giving away the business. First, this principle is related to “always consult instead of sell,” as naked service providers give prospective clients advice and service even before the prospect is a paying client. It is a demonstration of generosity

and trust that dramatically increases the likelihood of making a prospective client a paying client.

Second, this principle requires erring on the side of the client when it comes to fees. Naked service providers should look at it in terms of establishing a long-term relationship with a client. If this is the goal, then it is in the best interest of the service provider to focus more on helping the client and less on maximizing short-term revenue.

To support this principle, Lencioni relates the story of a colleague who was working with an ongoing client without having previously agreed to a price. When the bill was presented, the client stated that the cost was more than expected. The consultant changed the bill to be more in line with expectations—and client continues to work with the firm today.

3.) Tell the Kind Truth. Naked service providers are not afraid to gently confront a client with a difficult message, even when the client will not like hearing it. This type of honesty could put the relationship at risk, but the naked service provider knows that it is more important to serve the client's needs than to protect the service provider's own business. The truth-telling is conducted in a way that recognizes the dignity and humanity of the client; it is never a blunt assessment. The advice is not sugar-coated, but it is presented with kindness, empathy, and respect.

4.) Enter the Danger. As noted in the third principle, naked service providers do not shy away from uncomfortable situations. In fact, they step right in the middle of them, drawing from a concept of improvisational theater. In improvisation, it is natural for novices to avoid playing off a bizarre comment or behavior from another actor because they are worried that they will not handle it well. Seasoned actors take the opposite approach, seeking out and engaging in the wackiest situations—that is where the opportunity for genius lies.

In the world of consulting and service, “entering the danger” involves the courage to deal fearlessly with issues that everyone else is afraid to address. Perhaps more than any other service a consultant provides, this one provokes the most appreciation from clients, many

of whom have grown “weary of avoiding the elephant in the room—one that over time has become smellier and messier and therefore more untouchable.”

A naked service provider who stops and says, “Hey, does anyone smell that?” usually becomes a hero, as clients perceive the provider's confidence and integrity. These dangerous situations become opportunities for adding value and building trust.

The author admits that this principle may look similar to telling the kind truth, but it is done in a group setting. As an example, Lencioni tells the story of a consultant who was working with a senior executive who went on a tirade in front of his team. Following the outburst, the team went silent and waited for the moment to pass—just as they had let many similar moments pass. Instead of allowing it to pass, however, the consultant confronted the situation by stopping to discuss the impact that the tirade had on the team.

Society encourages us to avoid vulnerability, to always project strength, confidence and poise. Although this is certainly advisable in some situations in life, when it comes to important ongoing relationships, it stifles the ability to build trust.

Fear of Being Embarrassed

Naked service providers are not worried about looking awkward, and they actively seek to overcome the fear of being embarrassed by employing three principles:

1.) Ask Dumb Questions. Naked service providers ask the questions that others in the room want to ask but are afraid to ask out of embarrassment. Instead of being put off by some questions that miss the mark, clients remember the great questions that the service provider asked, and they forget the rest—especially if any not-so-great questions are quickly and humbly acknowledged by the service provider.

Service providers should think about times when a question came to mind that seemed too obvious to ask. When someone does pose it, the rest of the room tends to look at the questioner with gratitude and respect for having the courage to ask.

2.) Make Dumb Suggestions. It is only natural that a service provider who is willing to ask dumb or obvi-

ous questions should also be willing to make dumb suggestions. Just as clients will remember the great questions, they are also more likely to remember the great suggestions. The client will also have respect for service providers who do not hold back ideas or suggestions out of fear. After all, the client is paying for the objectivity of the consultant, so it is understandable that the suggestions will not be as informed as an employee's suggestions would be.

3.) Celebrate Mistakes. Naked service providers do not enjoy being wrong, but they do recognize that not all suggestions and solutions will be clear winners. Rather than attempt to hide or downplay errors, naked service providers acknowledge them and take responsibility for them. It may seem counter-intuitive that celebrating mistakes will increase the client's level of trust and loyalty, but it does. The client expects honesty and transparency, and acknowledging a mistake is the best way to demonstrate both of these characteristics.

Like a fifth-grader, we know that the only thing worse than raising our hand and having the wrong answer is failing to put our hand up at all.

Fear of Feeling Inferior

Related to the fear of being embarrassed is the fear of feeling inferior. To move beyond this fear, the naked service provider abides by four additional principles.

1.) Take a Bullet for the Client. This principle has the most potential for misunderstanding. Taking a bullet does not mean enabling a client to do the wrong thing by absorbing all blame for them; it is about finding moments of humility and "sacrificially taking some of the burden off of the client in a difficult situation, and then—and this is critical—confronting them with the kind truth."

Without that confrontation, taking a bullet would amount to enabling. However, there are times when a service provider is in the rare position to accept responsibility for something that he or she may not have been at fault for. If there is any doubt as to where the fault lies, the naked service provider always errs on the side of accepting responsibility.

The idea of taking a bullet may be hard to swallow, as people are often encouraged to deflect responsibility for problems, especially when there is doubt about where the blame lies. As Lencioni states, "Whether we are siblings fighting over our LEGO sets or plaintiffs in a legal battle, we generally seek to avoid direct or collateral damage in difficult situations."

2.) Make Everything about the Client. This is harder than it appears. It also has the potential to be very powerful. Naked service providers devote their full attention to the world of the client. They never try to shift attention to themselves, their experience, or their firm's knowledge. Rather, they make it clear that their focus is on understanding, honoring, and supporting the business of the client. As a result, naked service providers downplay their accomplishments and allow the client to discover these on their own.

3.) Honor the Client's Work. This principle goes one step further than making everything about the client:

naked service providers honor their clients by taking an active interest in their business and by appreciating the importance of that business to both the client and the client's customers. This is not

a sentiment that is easily faked. Even if the service provider is not naturally passionate about the client's business, he or she finds a way to develop and demonstrate engagement out of respect to the client. If, however, the potential client is involved in a business that the service provider cannot respect, then the service provider should decline the business.

4.) Do the Dirty Work. Naked service providers are always willing to take on whatever task the client needs them to do, within the context of their services. There are times when a client's needs will be neither attractive nor exciting—in fact, they might even cause the service provider's reputation to be perceived as lower. But because naked service providers are humble and more concerned about their clients than about themselves, they will do what is needed and, in turn, win the client's loyalty and gratitude.

As an example, Lencioni and a colleague were once hired to improve the health of an international company and the capacity of its leaders. Part of that work

involved a leadership development conference. Lencioni and his firm helped organize the conference and design the curriculum, in addition to planning dinner menus and running microphones around the conference during the question-and-answer session.

There is one final principle that the true naked service provider follows, and it is more general and all-encompassing than the others.

Admit Weaknesses and Limitations – In some ways this principle resembles celebrating mistakes, but there are some distinct and important differences. First of all, it is one thing to be honest about a single mistake, and quite another to admit a general weakness. According to Lencioni, all people have weaknesses, and service providers who attempt to conceal them will find themselves in situations where they have to do things in which they are not skilled. Second, service providers who do not admit their weaknesses and limitations wear themselves out trying to be something they are not. This is not just exhausting; it is also a barrier that prevents service providers from doing their best in areas where they thrive.

Being naked has benefits and advantages even beyond the world of client service. Demonstrating vulnerability to other people builds stronger relationships, affirms trust, and inspires others to be vulnerable as well.

While the principles for getting naked and embracing vulnerability apply mostly to management consultants, financial advisors, public relations specialists, technical service providers, and internal corporate support providers, they can also be applied to services that involve ongoing relationships with clients, such as doctors, lawyers, sales account managers, and life coaches, among others.



FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Reading Time 3-4 hours, 220 pages

Patrick Lencioni's **Getting Naked** offers a very different approach to providing service to clients. He skips over the intuitive concepts about demonstrating knowledge of a client's business and of showing the expertise of

the service provider. Instead, he proposes that service providers consciously play down their own expertise and make themselves vulnerable in front of clients.

Just as the approach to providing service seems to be unconventional, so is the book. Rather than hammering out principles and providing exhaustive examples from real life, Lencioni chooses to open the book with a fable about a service provider who learns how to become more vulnerable. The fable provides rich examples of the principles that are outlined in the second half of the book.

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