What Is Operational Transparency

Idea In Short

Show clients the work in progress. Operational transparency raises perceived value, deepens loyalty and accelerates adoption, so build deliberate windows into your processes rather than hiding the effort behind a polished final deliverable.

The Core Idea Behind Operational Transparency

Operational transparency is exactly what it sounds like. It means showing the customer how hard you are working for them. Think of a restaurant with an open kitchen where you can watch your meal being prepared. Think of Amazon letting you track your package from warehouse to doorstep. Think of your landscaper leaving a note confirming the lawn was cut today. In a world accustomed to frictionless transactions, it is often helpful to remind customers of the work involved.

Ryan Buell, a professor at Harvard Business School, argues in his research that customers appreciate operational transparency. His findings link it to higher customer satisfaction, greater loyalty, more patience and increased willingness to pay. Customers genuinely want to see the work in progress. Some traditional biases, such as the assumption that customers do not care about process details, turn out to be overly simplistic and often wrong.

Buell published a detailed article in Harvard Business Review outlining how transparency can enhance communication, service and influence. His work describes several scenarios that feel surprising at first glance. Fast-food cameras showing the work being done can increase both customer and employee satisfaction. Online retailers revealing cost percentages and profit margins can actually help sell more product. Shared medical appointments with three or four patients can produce better outcomes than solo visits 1. Each example challenges the instinct to hide the backstage.

Why Customers Crave Visibility

Many customers are naturally control-oriented. They like to stay informed and skim multiple news sources. They manage their environments through phone notifications, smart routines and connected thermostats. People live habitual lives, so it is natural for them to ask questions of their vendors. They want to know the status of their order and how much longer they must wait. They want to know who is in charge when they get passed between departments. They want to know whether the team is organized or whether they must remind someone again tomorrow.

Customers also want a say in how they are treated. They want to be asked for their opinion rather than processed like everyone else. They want assurance that no one is wasting time on things they do not value. These questions are not nitpicking. They reflect a genuine desire for involvement and confidence in the relationship. Transparency answers these questions before they become complaints.

Applying Transparency to Consulting Work

As a practitioner, the research on operational transparency prompts reflection on how consultants use it in their own work. Six practical applications translate the concept directly into consulting practice.

Inform the Client and Your Manager

The first principle is to keep the client and your manager informed. As the Workplace Therapist says, in the absence of communication, people assume the worst. If the client cannot explain the project's progress to their boss, that spells trouble. You want your client counterpart on board and advocating for you. That is why consultants insist on interim status report meetings with clients.

Regular updates prevent the vacuum that breeds anxiety. A brief weekly note describing what was accomplished, what is next and what risks remain can transform a client's experience. The consultant looks organized, and the client feels respected. Transparency here is less about showing off and more about removing doubt.

Celebrate the Work Accomplished

The second principle is to take credit for work accomplished. The formula is simple.

Satisfaction equals perception minus expectations. If you are doing great work, operational transparency can raise the client's perception of the quality, speed and efficacy of that work. When perception exceeds expectations, satisfaction follows.

Projects are hard on both the consultant and the client. Celebrate when you can. When your team scores a win, remind the client. Small wins generate momentum. They show that you are present and committed to making the client successful. Recognition is not vanity. It is a disciplined way to manage perception and keep energy high 2.

Customize Through Client Feedback

The third principle is to gather client feedback and input. Consultants write detailed statements of work to manage expectations and outline the deliverables. They try to anticipate curve balls, risks and unknowns. Yet these estimates are often off by twenty percent or more. Ask any consultant for a list of crazy stories, and you will hear how something always goes a little wrong.

Being operationally transparent gives the client a chance to chime in and refine the hypothesis. A thoughtful client helps triangulate toward a better answer. Best practices only carry you so far. The solution inevitably needs to be tailored to the client's situation. No client wants to be force-fed a solution. Customers want choice and a voice in the recommendations. They may disagree with assumptions or refine constraints. It is far better to give clients a say early in the process rather than at the final report.

Clarify by Providing Options

The fourth principle is to provide the client with options. David Maister outlined common traits of trusted advisors in his book on the subject. His framework aligns naturally with operational transparency 3. Trusted advisors help clients think things through while leaving the decision to them. They give reasoning to help clients think, not just conclusions. They present options, increase understanding of those options, give a recommendation and let the client choose.

Unlike a multiple choice test, client projects rarely have a single answer. There is a range of solutions. Consultants narrow down recommendations using client interviews, workshops, design sessions, observations, surveys and disciplined thinking. Presenting those options transparently builds trust and ensures the client owns the final decision.

Coach Clients Toward Ownership

The fifth principle is to get clients involved in the work. For real results, clients need to take ownership of implementation as soon as possible. Change takes time, often months and years, while consulting projects are short by design. Savvy consultants give clients a real-time look at the work in progress. This starts the change process early. You want the client's fingerprints on the recommendations. Pre-wire the meeting. Build consensus before the formal decision point.

Solving problems in a black box does not give clients the competence or confidence needed for long-term results. The days of a management doctor simply telling the patient what to do are gone. Clients who participate in the process are more likely to champion the outcome. They understand the trade-offs and can defend the choices to their stakeholders.

Kaizen and the Transparency Caveat

The sixth principle carries a massive caveat. If your processes are a mess, beware. If your company is rife with bureaucracy, internal politics and sloppy work, transparency is harmful. No one wants to watch you do a poor job in slow motion. No one wants to watch the sausage being made in a dirty kitchen.

Transparency can be humbling and potentially embarrassing. Having customers peer into your metaphorical kitchen implies that the floors are clean and the ingredients are washed. Operational transparency swings both ways. It makes good companies seem greater, and it exposes poorly run companies for the mess they are.

Next Steps for Practitioners

If operational transparency can enhance the customer's perception of value, it leads to a few practical questions. What should you reveal? How should you reveal it? When should you reveal it? The answers depend on your industry, your client relationship and the maturity of your processes. Start small. Share progress notes. Invite feedback on draft deliverables. Show the reasoning behind your recommendations. The goal is not to overwhelm clients with detail but to make the invisible work visible.

- 1Operational Transparency, Harvard Business Review
- 2Harvard Business Professor Analyzes Bad Customers, Harvard Gazette
- 3David Maister, Wikipedia

Summary

Operational transparency is a deliberate choice to let customers see the work behind the result. It lifts satisfaction, loyalty and willingness to pay, but only when your processes are clean. Reveal the right things at the right time, and let clients put their fingerprints on the solution.