

Rubbing One's Smell on the Project

By Justin Locke

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When you give clients advice, sometimes they ignore it. Though vexing, it is an important reminder that you are their financial advisor and not their financial commander.

I'll explain why clients behave this way – and you'll understand how I chose the title of this article when I do – beginning first with a short anecdote from my previous career as a professional musician.

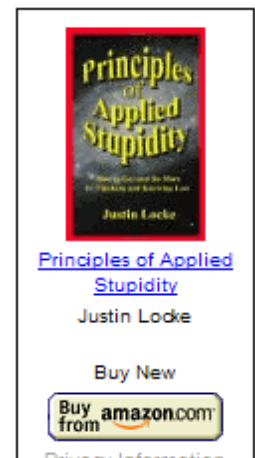
My colleagues and I would spend a great deal of time analyzing “the composer’s intentions.” We practically deified those long-dead European composers, and some of my colleagues built their careers around the notion that they were the foremost experts on how this composer or that composer wanted their music performed.

When I got around to writing a few musical plays myself, and took on the role of “composer,” I assumed the same highly deferential dynamic would re-manifest itself, with me in the role of composer deity. I confess to being more than just a little eager to get this going. I liked the idea of being venerated. And it seemed simple enough. After all, if Mozart were alive, wouldn't everyone be calling him up to ask him how to perform his *Requiem*? So for several years, whenever my plays were rented, I sat eagerly by the phone, waiting to be worshipped.

Boy was I wrong.

I've been renting out my stage plays for over 25 years now, and not once in all those years has a stage director or conductor ever called me to ask my input on how my pieces should be performed. In fact, in those rare instances where I took the initiative and offered my input, these folks were generally resistant to what I had to say – sometimes even downright hostile.

My observations of all this genuflection to composers had missed the key point – these guys were all long-dead. Turns out all this deification was really just a dodge – it was a clever way to invoke the gravitas of famous composers to justify and buttress the musician's own personal interpretations. Since the composer was dead, it was not likely





that he would offer much in the way of argument. How convenient.

At this point, I want to introduce a word that you may already know: mash-up.

In its modern usage, a mash-up is an amalgamation of two or more sources, such as two different songs or pieces of software. What I've come to understand is that when a client rents one of my pieces they have no desire to obediently execute my instructions. There is a consistent universal desire to "mash it up," combining my original work with their own ideas.

The standard educational experience does not expose us very much to mash-ups. You don't see high school students cutting up their chemistry and math textbooks and combining them into something completely different. So when we first encounter mash-ups in real life, it can be a bit jarring. We expect our clients and customers to see us as teachers and behave like students. But this is rarely the case. Instead of being obedient, they want to help. They want to edit. They want to participate.

They want to rub their smell on the project.

In fact, because most people live in worlds that suppress their desire to mash up, when they get the chance, they go wild. They want to mash things up with their own ideas, experience, and perspective. And with your clients, since it's their money, it's hard to stop them.

Again, it is easy to be vexed by this, especially when a client wants to do something that seems totally off-the-wall to you.

In my experience, though, it's always fascinating to see what people will do with my compositions, whether it's a completely different interpretation or a really clever twist on a key element. When I see that, I immediately take their idea and "mash it up" into the original script.

I now have a completely different goal as a speaker and writer. I never provide a top-down syllabus requiring the blind obedience of the customer. Instead, like the best conductors I played for, my goal is to provide fundamental paradigms, structure, and universally usable tools. If I am providing good tools, they can be used for all sorts of purposes, in ways I can't even imagine. Instead of fighting the client's desire to make changes, I anticipate it and support it, knowing it's going to happen whether I like it or not.

As a financial adviser and not a financial commander, it can be frustrating when your highly refined advice is ignored. Unless people are on the payroll and have to obey you, however, their urge to mix things up will invariably win out. People want to put their stamp on things – and the best advisors are the ones who, armed with that knowledge, make sure they're still getting their own stamp on the final mash-up that results.



Justin Locke is a speaker based in Boston. He spent 18 seasons playing the bass with the Boston Pops, and he is the author of several books, including "Real Men Don't Rehearse" (a musical memoir) and "Principles of Applied Stupidity," a look at how to be more productive and effective by going against the conventional wisdom. See more by visiting his website at www.justinlocke.com.

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