

Ep #20: Conflict Resolution for Creative Introverts



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With Your Host

Rachel Cannon

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Welcome to *Loudmouth Introvert*, a podcast for helping creative introverted entrepreneurs thrive, despite living in a world that's designed for extroverts to succeed. If you're ready to make more money and build the creative business you've been dreaming of, you're in the right place. I'm your host Rachel Cannon.

Happy Galentine's Day, friends! I hope you've called or texted your girlfriends today to tell them that they are intelligent, beautiful, strong women and you're happy that they're in your life! I have a handful of close friends who are incredible in their own unique ways, and I do feel incredibly lucky that I know such kind-hearted, funny, and caring people. I know it's sort of cliché to talk about how you cherish friendships where you can pick up right where you left off, even if you haven't seen each other in months or years, but for introverts, I feel like this has a whole other kind of meaning! I love a low-maintenance friendship. I love when it's just easy. When everybody understands the deal is that we're all busy and that doesn't mean we're not thinking about each other, but that when we do spend time together the laughs are deeper and the memories are sweeter. I'm all about that kind of friendship from my Galentines. And I recently met a lovely new friend who left me a very sweet review on Apple Podcasts. Erin says:

“Somehow, Rachel is able to put into words what plagues the introverted creative. Things you didn't even realize were hindering you, she reveals and gives you the tools to work through them while still being true to your wonderful self. If you are a creative, and feel like you're being held back or not reaching your full potential because you're not an extrovert, this podcast is your life blood and a total game changer.”

Thank you so much! I guess I'm able to put all of this into words because I'm one of you. I've experienced most – if not all – of what we've discussed on this podcast, and I make every effort to be real with you. So, on the topic of things that hinder us and being real, we need to talk about conflict, which

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is definitely one of those areas where we can get paralyzed in our businesses. If you, like many other introverted, creative entrepreneurs, have ever felt like you needed a beta-blocker when it came to confronting something – a client, a vendor, etc. – in your business, then you know exactly what I'm talking about. I myself have often wished for the beta-blocker when the tension and anxiety was just too much for me! One time a client was coming in to pay their final bill, and kept insisting that I be here when they showed up. Okay, (a) you can pay by mailing a check, and (b) I'm not the one collecting the money. So I knew that this could only mean one thing. They wanted to have their little moment where they felt superior...and boy, did they ever. I was hostage in my office for a full 20 minutes where I was presented with instance after instance where they believed I had failed them. It was horrible. However, since I'd been prepping for it for a few days ahead of time, I was ready with a rebuttal...and then when I heard the nit-picky things I was being told I'd failed at, I felt just fine about correcting them. And correct them I did. Now, there are people who will tell you that the customer is always right. However, I don't believe that. Especially not when a customer is giving you a rundown of the normal hiccups and bumps that every design project experiences – most of which were not on my part at all (a furniture store charged them the wrong price for a piece of furniture, which I immediately had them correct, a custom piece of furniture was made to a height the client specified, which they then decided was the wrong height, and I had it corrected - at my expense). Sitting in my office, going tit-for-tat was truly a petty experience, but I felt it was important for me to stand my ground since I will always own up to my mistakes and typically go overboard to make them right, and also because I knew that none of these grievances really had anything to do with errors on our part. And truthfully, up until that point, I'd lived in the "the customer is always right" world for so long that I had just begun assuming that in business, everything was my fault. But something changed for me that day. By standing my ground and in the moment, offering examples of how I'd stepped in to make things right – the ones that weren't actually errors that my business had made – I felt like I'd truly come into my own as a business owner. It was tough, and I don't like to think back on it, but I also don't have any regrets because what was at questions

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was my integrity, and I start and end everything I do with integrity. I couldn't allow this to just go on. I didn't agree to make anything else right for them, because I already knew I'd done everything within my power to make the process as easy for them as possible. Fortunately, I've only really had this one truly awful experience in my 10 years as a business owner. But I'm sure you've had your own and you've felt the same fight or flight debate in your gut – do you argue with the client to get them to see your point, or do you just agree and back down in order to keep the peace? I think it's a case-by-case basis, but I can tell you I err more on the side of stand and fight (although I don't really mean "fight" with words or actions, I just mean defend yourself).

So to put this in clearer terms, you might have been in this position if you've ever experienced any of these:

- The client receives your bill and doesn't pay it on time (or worse, doesn't pay it at all)
- The client receives your deliverable – whether a service or good, and then asks for their money back
- The client does not reply to your communications, then creates a panic that you must act quickly to resolve
- The client has paid you for a service, but then continues to pepper you for more information for free once it's over

I'm imagining all of us like we were in our own event auditorium and every hand in the building is raised because – who hasn't been there?? And, boy, does it SUCK. It does! It's the worst! Because what are you supposed to do in these situations? Chase them down for the money? Send them to a collections agency? Refuse to give them their money back? Insist that they pay you for another service consultation? We'd probably all rather go broke

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than imagine doing any of those things because of this one little dirty secret about creative, introverted entrepreneurs: we don't want anyone to NOT like us. We think we'll risk our reputation and never be able to build a business by having a backbone. Well, let me drop this knowledge on you: you'll never grow your business if you can't get paid for your offerings. It's that simple.

Unfortunately, many small business owners (of all kinds, not just creative introverts) get to this place and are unable to find a way out of it. We bend over backwards to please everyone, going above and beyond the call of duty to make everything right (often to the complete detriment of our bottom line), and we feel like all of our efforts go unnoticed. And we can have great clients thrown into the mix, but it's difficult to focus on how great those people are because the bad apple spoils the bunch! We assume we have to take the good with the bad, as long as we always come out looking good. But think about this – if “looking good” means you secretly harbor some nasty feelings about the bad stuff, and the resentment you feel grows and grows, and you lose your will to even care about your work...do you look good then? I would venture to say that is actually not a good look. And we have to be really careful about getting to that point. When the bitterness of feeling overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated catches up with us because guess what happens then? That's the vibe you're putting off, and how can you expect to attract amazing, thankful, wonderful clients with that kind of attitude??

Okay now that I've worked you up into a full-on panic attack, breathe a sigh of relief. Because what I'm about to tell you is going to put your heart at ease. Here is your beta-blocker: You can always get paid on time, never argue with a client over money again, eliminate putting out fires, and stop feeding the freebie monster. Imagine how great it would be to just work on your business without these ridiculous distractions? I mean, it's hard enough building your empire on a good day, right? It just takes one or two

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of these curveballs to knock us down and make us feel defeated. And believe me, I have some of the sweetest, kindest clients on the planet, but can you imagine what happened to me the day the stinker planted themselves in my guest chairs in my office? ALL of my attention was devoted to them before, during, and after that confrontation, and it was DIVERTED from my AWESOME clients. I lost precious energy, creativity, and confidence because I felt like my very core had been called into question. So what's the secret to putting a stop to this kind of nonsense? Y'all, it's so simple, that you're probably going to ask me for your money back, but haha joke's on you, this is a podcast and it's free. But like most things in life, the simplest answer is often the best one.

Deal with it before it becomes an issue, learn from all confrontations – big and small, and focus your energy and efforts on your GOOD clients (who deserve it anyway).

So what do I mean by “deal with it before it becomes an issue”? Well, it's one of the words we creatives HATE to use in our businesses because we think it's going to scare potential clients away. In fact, a lot of us avoid this altogether and just barrel through on a hope and a prayer that nothing goes wrong. Can you guess what I'm talking about? It's a contract. I know. Scary, right? Some of us even like to use its kinder, gentler cousin, the “letter of agreement”...some of us don't use anything. But think about it. Even on the receipt you get from a boutique, there are some terms printed at the bottom that tell you when you have to make a return or if all sales or final. Their hours are usually printed somewhere on it, too. How many of us are running creative, service-based businesses and never communicating how we want to work to our clients? The sad truth is that a lot of us are. So think of your contract, your terms of agreement, your letter of agreement – whatever you want to call it – like this: it exists only to settle any confusion that may happen while you're working with a client. They don't know how to reach you on the weekend? Look at the contract. They're unsure when

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their bill is due? It's in the contract. When will their services be completed? In the contract. What if they need more help after that? Oh, that's in the contract, too. If the idea of using a contract makes you feel intimidated, or like you'll lose clients because you want them to sign a contract (or letter of agreement, or terms of agreement), just remember this: this is your opportunity to address all of those confrontations that we HATE having to deal with long before they may ever actually happen. In fact, a lot of the drama surrounding confrontations happens because we haven't been clear with our clients in the beginning about how we work. So if we just think of it that way, instead of like this big, scary thing that's going to make our potential clients run away with their tails tucked, we can see how it's actually a really useful tool for everyone involved. All it does is get out in front of the confusion in the beginning, which helps minimize the confrontation later on!

But let's say you didn't use a contract, and you've found yourself in a confrontation, like now. Like today. And you're avoiding the client's calls and emails because you're hoping it'll just go away. How are we supposed to handle confrontation when it's making our hearts beat out of our chests, and we have avoided it for way too long and now the client is beyond confrontational; they're furious? We already know we're walking into what is sure to be the worst experience ever. Obviously, you're going to have to address it. So my advice is this: consider where you might have been unclear. Think about it from the client's perspective. Did you promise something you didn't deliver? Or did they assume something you never actually discussed and that's how the trouble started? Are they upset because of something else entirely? Were they just looking to you to be their advocate? We can't really deal with confrontation unless we're able to go into it with a clear picture of both sides, right? Always prepare by getting your head right. Summon your better nature. Be the center of calm (even when you're shaking in your boots). Don't react, respond. Hear them out, listen to what they're frustrated about, and then determine how you will work together to resolve it. The worst thing that can happen is for you to

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find yourself on opposite sides of the table with your client. That's where I was (literally) when the stinker came and held me hostage for 20 minutes. I was fully prepared to apologize for any wrong I'd done, but when I heard the list that was presented to me, and I realized that I wouldn't change anything, and that I actually HAD done everything I could to make the experience a good one, I felt vindicated. I felt strong in standing up for my actions, because I knew none of them were questionable. You might have to eat a little crow, though. Sometimes if you haven't communicated effectively, and now there's a problem, you might have to say "you know what, you're right, that was poor communication on my part, and I see what you mean. Here's how we can work together to fix it, and then moving forward, I'll make sure I do a better job of being clear with you." You'll have moments where you do learn from the confrontation you have to deal with, and when you do, just think of it this way – it's all feedback. We like to only get positive feedback because it makes us feel good, but think about the times when you've heard people talk about other creative's reputations. I've definitely had an earful about other interior designers in my town, and I always wonder, "why are you telling me this?" Wouldn't it be more helpful if you told her? Then maybe she could take some steps to improve her service. I would HATE to be the person people were badmouthing. I don't know of a single creative introvert who willingly does a bad job for their clients, doesn't care what they think about them, and blows through them one after another without giving a thought to the clients' experience. So think of it as a blessing when a client is willing to tell you they're dissatisfied, because they could go tell 50 other people about it instead. Take their feedback as constructive information that you can use to improve yourself as a business owner and service provider. Even if you keep to your process, but make it clear in your terms of agreement up front so they know what to expect.

Now, what happens when you find yourself, like I did, with a stinker? First of all, you cannot guarantee happiness. You are not an anti-depressant, and that is not your job. You can fulfill your end of the agreement, which is

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to deliver a service or good in the time frame outlined, and help them understand what happens if they can't reach a decision by that time. So let's say you did all of that, and you still end up with a stinker. What is a creative introvert to do? When you are feeling depressed, stressed, worried, and fearful of the impending confrontation, rather than spending your time obsessing over how it's going to turn out, focus your energy on your good clients. The ones who make your job a breeze. The ones who always say thank you. The ones who email you months later to say thank you again. The ones who, even if you didn't have a professional relationship with, you'd want to hang out with anyway. Focusing on the clients who are grateful for your help, instead of the ones who can never be happy, no matter what you do or what shape you contort yourself into, will allow you to reconnect with why you decided to go into your field to begin with. Because when it's good, it's great, right? It's rewarding! And while you're focusing on those clients, take a moment to send them a handwritten note or an email or even call them to tell them how much you appreciate working with them. Tell them that they're fun and they make your job so easy and enjoyable. This is not only going to make your clients feel even more grateful to have you, but you will create some positive mojo – and you need that in the face of a confrontation that you have to deal with! It's a reminder that not everything is bad!! It's so easy to get tunnel vision when we have these kinds of clients and we turn into a circus act, jumping through every hoop, balancing everything, bending over backwards to please them, while on the sidelines sit our incredible clients, waiting patiently for us to get back to them.

I know you don't like conflict and confrontation. I don't like it either. I try to avoid it at all costs. But in growing my creative service business, I realized that the healthiest approach for me was to deal with it before it becomes an issue by having clear terms and deliverables written down and agreed to by all parties. Just communicating up front what is expected from everyone and clearing up any confusion then and there – before the work starts – was a game-changer! And then making a concerted effort to learn

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something when there is a conflict, and taking the client's frustrations in as feedback and not a personal attack on me. People want to be heard, and if one client has a valid frustration, it's probably a sign that I need to improve my services. And finally, if I ever do find myself with a stinker again, I'll focus my energy and efforts on the clients who are fun and easy to work with, rather than devoting all of my energy on the one who won't be happy no matter what I do. I hope you'll make the same commitments to yourself in your creative business. As an introverted entrepreneur, you'll instantly see how your energy can be protected in the long run by implementing these strategies.

Hey, y'all, if you love the show and you find it useful, I would really appreciate it if you would leave me a rating and a review on Apple Podcasts, or iTunes if you're an Android or Windows user. Your feedback helps other creative introverted entrepreneurs find the show and it helps me create an awesome show that provides tons of value.

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