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Is the counseling profession an art or skill?

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A prospective client the other day asked me "What is a Counselor?" The counseling profession has been around for decades but many real estate professionals were not aware they were counseling. In very general terms, it is a paid real estate advisor. Some people think its consulting but it is much more than that. In short, it is guiding a client from a problem to solution with an understanding of the problem, a gathering of the facts and information, evaluating the real estate information and most importantly, offering recommendations on a course of action.

In some cases, many of us feel that it is both an art and skill. Webster's defines "art" as "human creativity; skill; a branch of learning" while it defines "skill" as "great ability or proficiency; expertness." It is difficult to find a college course that teaches someone how to counsel. It has been an emerging and evolving industry for many years. Typically urban planners, engineers, lawyers, architects, appraisers are professions that are accustomed to developing proposals for paid services and in many cases are offering recommendations. They are often great candidates to be designated as a counselor.

A counselor, like an appraiser, has to be able to evaluate information and submit recommendations that are unbiased in the field of real estate. The counselor has to be qualified and competent in that particular discipline topic. Real estate counseling can span many disciplines of the industry such as hotel, office, industrial, land, retail, R&D, government property, non-profit property, hospitality and leisure property, residential, multi-family, etc. you name it there is probably an individual who is counseling in that field.

In today's world we have an industry that has intestinal turmoil and a nauseating economy. Decisions to be made today are very difficult without any signs of patterns for the future. It is very uncertain. Our counseling profession changes with twists and turns as the real estate industry reaches new levels and morphs into new cycles. Variables are constantly changing as a new "normal" evolves. Are we doing the same work as 30 years ago? Yes and no. The locations may be local but building design and functionality changes. The type of tenants and types of uses change. Ten years ago we were focused on dot.com's and hi-tech. Now it might be more medical, bio-tech, non-profit institutions and pharmaceutical issues. Massachusetts is considering casino development and certainly that would be a new discipline for many of us. It is difficult to have a grasp on what will be the next revolution of uses and required skills. In precarious times, the need for counseling seems to be greater. Age and experience as a Counselor has extreme merit and recommendations can be very relevant as it relates to mistakes remembered from 20, 30 or 40 years ago. Reproducing seniority and experience, whether good or bad, is very difficult to recreate. You don't learn experiences, you live experiences then become further educated and that provide value. Most counseling problems that I have experienced tend to be unique and unprecedented. It can sometimes be difficult for a counselor to find another counselor for advice that has had similar

experiences. One of our counselors was hired to recommend a value on the Grand Canyon to the U.S. government; another was involved in the negotiations to settle the World Trade Center insurance; and other assignments were to counsel the Archdiocese in the disposition of its properties. There are no reference books to help a counselor solve these problems. The solutions are more driven by proper understanding of the problem, using appropriate methodology, being extremely patient and detailed in organization and evaluation. Sometimes it's a trial and error process but in the end, the counselor is never shy or timid to make his/her recommendations, then stand behind those recommendations and be able to be flexible to see changes along the way.

So is counseling an art or skill? It's both.

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