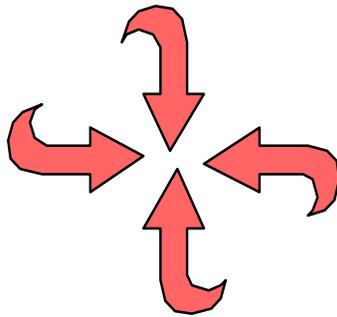


Why SLAs Fail

and

How to Make Yours

Succeed



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Contents

Introduction	1
Factors that contribute to SLA failure and success	2
A. Use the SLA as a relationship-strengthen tool	3
B. Anticipate the time needed to create an SLA	5
Time-intensive SLA tasks	6
Factors that affect the duration of the SLA effort	7
C. Set the stage for success	9
Three key stage-setting activities	9
D. Pay attention to the details	12
Flaws and omissions to guard against	12
E. Make the SLA a living document	15
Responsibilities in managing an SLA	17
Conclusion	18
Related resources	18
Naomi's products and services	19

Tables

Table 1. SLA working definition	1
Table 2. Contributors to SLA failure and success	2
Table 3. Time estimates for establishing an SLA	8

NOTICE

I invite you to distribute this guide in electronic or printed form to others in your company and to those with whom you're negotiating SLAs. However, you may not distribute it to anyone else outside your company or use it for any commercial purpose without my written permission.

Please feel free to contact me at naomi@nkarten.com to request permission. Many thanks.

Introduction

A service level agreement is a highly effective mechanism for managing service expectations, improving communication, clarifying responsibilities, and ensuring a shared approach to assessing service effectiveness. But creating an SLA is a complex process that, if undertaken improperly, can generate more problems that it solves.

For more than a decade, I have provided SLA seminars internationally, reviewed hundreds of SLAs, and assisted organizations embarking on an SLA effort or striving to recover from an effort that went awry. In the course of this work, I have observed patterns of recurring problems in the SLA document and in the process by which the SLA is created and managed. I have organized these observations into a set of factors that contribute to SLA success — or failure.

My objective in this guide is to describe those factors and to offer guidelines and recommendations to help you succeed where others have not.

Table 1 offers a definition for use in understanding what follows.

<p style="text-align: center;">Service Level Agreement: A Working Definition</p> <p>An SLA is a formal, negotiated communication process that helps providers and customers build a strong, lasting and trusting relationship by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussing and documenting service expectations• Clarifying responsibilities• Creating an objective basis for assessing service effectiveness
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Table 1. SLA Working Definition

Your definition may not precisely match mine. But it's important that you have a definition, because many of those responsible for creating or supporting an SLA have a flawed understanding of what an SLA is, what it can realistically accomplish, and how it functions. Having a working definition provides a starting point in educating them about SLAs — and as you'll see in this guide, educating pertinent parties about SLAs is one of the keys to SLA success.

Factors that Contribute to SLA Failure and Success

Organizations with successful SLAs have consciously paid attention to the factors in Table 2 described as contributing to SLA success.

Conversely, most unsuccessful or troubled SLA efforts have been characterized by one or more of the factors described as contributing to failure. The result is that the effectiveness of the SLA is seriously impaired; furthermore, the relationship between the provider and customer often worsens from its pre-SLA-effort level.

In some such situations, the factors contributing to SLA failure result in an SLA effort that is discontinued without an SLA ever being created. Such situations often have a negative impact on customer satisfaction because of expectations that had been raised in anticipation of improved service.

Conversely, organizations with successful SLAs have consciously paid attention to the success factors in this table.

	Focus	Contributor to SLA Failure	Contributor to SLA Success
A	Attitude	Create an SLA to force changes in behavior.	Create it to achieve a win-win relationship.
B	Timing	Arbitrarily rush the SLA effort.	Anticipate the time needed to create it.
C	Process	Omit several critical steps.	Set the stage for success.
D	Document	Overlook essential details.	Pay attention to the details.
E	Operation	Ignore the implemented agreement.	Make the SLA a living document.

Table 2. Contributors to SLA Failure and Success

A. Create the SLA to Achieve a Win-Win Relationship.

Focus	Contributor to SLA Failure	Contributor to SLA Success
Attitude	Create an SLA to force changes in behavior.	Create it to achieve a win-win relationship.

Typically, “force changes in behavior” means forcing the *other* party to shape up, quiet down, or in some other way to modify their behavior to accommodate the wishes of the party doing the forcing. For example, service providers sometimes initiate an SLA effort in hopes that an SLA will stifle customer complaints. Customers sometimes undertake an SLA effort in hopes that it will make their provider more receptive to their requests and demands.

The reality is, however, that you can't build agreement by clobbering the other party. An SLA effort stands the best chance of succeeding when all parties enter into it in a spirit of cooperation, rather than in hopes of trapping the other party into compliance. SLAs can help you achieve a result that benefits both the provider and customer in several ways:

- They help the provider and customer clarify the terms and conditions of service delivery and keep service targets in clear view.
- They provide a context for open and cooperative discussion about service effectiveness.
- They provide an avenue for making service changes when such changes are warranted.
- They help each party better understand the other's service expectations, so that they can work together to achieve shared goals. As a result, misunderstandings occur less often and are more readily and amicably resolved.
- It clarifies responsibilities so that everyone knows what needs to be done and who is doing what.

For an SLA to benefit both providers and customers, the process of creating it *must* be collaborative. It may not be feasible or appropriate for both parties to participate in all facets of creating and managing the SLA. But both parties must have a say in the process and in presenting their perspective (and being listened to). In many circumstances, it's appropriate for a provider organization to implement policies, standards or practices unilaterally, but the outcome of such efforts should not be labeled as an agreement.

**If both parties have not agreed to it,
don't call it an agreement!**

B. Anticipate the Time Needed to Create an SLA.

Focus	Contributor to SLA Failure	Contributor to SLA Success
Timing	Arbitrarily rush the SLA effort.	Use the SLA as a relationship-strengthening tool.

Invariably, some of the people who attend my SLA seminars have great hopes (or specific instructions) to return and complete an SLA in the next week. This expectation reflects the common misconception that creating an SLA is a simple matter of plugging names and numbers into either a template or an existing SLA.

This does not mean that you cannot accelerate the pace of an SLA effort. In fact, an awareness of the pitfalls to avoid, such as those described in this guide, is one of the keys to creating an SLA expeditiously. Furthermore, an accelerated timeframe is sometimes necessary because the SLA is tied to an mandated implementation or activity whose deadline you have no control over.

But rushing the effort so as to be done by an arbitrarily selected date in the belief that faster is better is a certain way to sabotage the entire effort. The operative word here is *arbitrarily*. The value of the effort is in the communication that takes place while the SLA is being created. This communication is essential in allowing the parties to present their perspective and to learn more about the perspective of the other.

Typically, this level of communication is much needed, but has not occurred previously. Therefore, it is unwise to short circuit this process.

An SLA is neither a simple strategy for service improvement nor a quick fix for a troubled relationship. Establishing an effective SLA requires *much* more than simply filling in the blanks of an SLA template or modifying a sample agreement. The process of planning, establishing and implementing an agreement is typically a many-month process of information-gathering, analyzing, documenting, presenting, educating, negotiating and consensus-building.

Time-Intensive SLA Tasks

Some of the tasks that often prove time-intensive include the following:

- 1. Create an SLA team.** This team may include a key individual from both the customer and provider organization who head the effort and oversee it. In addition, the team may include subject matter experts, support staff, and financial and legal personnel. The team may require some preparation for overseeing the effort. Often, those charged with creating SLAs are unfamiliar or inexperienced with the process. Before they can proceed, they need to gather material, raise questions, seek training, and so on, so that they can confidently and competently facilitate the process.
- 2. Conduct information-gathering sessions.** Before establishing an SLA, it is valuable for providers to gain insight into customer perceptions and satisfaction. This feedback accomplishes several things: (1) it provides insight into the issues of greatest concern to customers, (2) it offers a starting point for establishing service targets, and (3) it provides a baseline against which to assess changes in customer satisfaction after SLA implementation.
- 3. Create service descriptions.** Creating a service description, whether as a comprehensive service catalog or brief list of services offered, is one of the most time-consuming tasks for the provider that does not yet have such a description. Even if a service description already exists, it is wise to validate that it's complete and that all pertinent parties understand the information provided. Once the description has been developed, this task is reduced to simply reviewing that it adequately captures all essential information.
- 4. Complete pre-implementation activities.** These activities may include such things as developing tracking mechanisms, establishing reporting processes, preparing documentation, developing procedures for carrying out stated responsibilities, familiarizing all appropriate parties with the agreement and its impact, planning for periodic reviews, and if desired, conducting a pilot.
- 5. Schedule meetings.** One of the most challenging tasks, you may not be surprised to hear, is simply getting people together for meetings. Most participants in the SLA effort have numerous responsibilities and priorities aside from SLAs, with impact on both their ability to complete assigned tasks and their availability to attend SLA meetings. To the extent possible, meetings requiring the presence of multiple parties should be kept as few as possible.

Factors That Affect the Duration of the SLA Effort

Overlaying the specific tasks entailed in creating an SLA are several factors that affect how long it will take to complete each task:

- 1. The service environment.** The more services covered by an SLA, and the more complex these services, the longer it takes the two parties to discuss, negotiate and document the conditions of service delivery
- 2. The proximity of the parties.** When the parties to the SLA are located far apart and travel is needed to enable face-to-face contact, it can add significantly to the elapsed time.
- 3. The span of impact of the SLA.** Establishing an SLA between two parties in a home office is generally less time-intensive than establishing an SLA that spans regional, national or international boundaries.
- 4. The relationship between the parties.** When the relationship between the provider and customer is a positive one, the effort proceeds much more quickly than when that relationship has been tarnished by conflict, distrust and dissatisfaction. In the latter situation, additional steps may be needed to begin to repair the relationship before undertaking the more formal SLA process.
- 5. The contractual nature of the SLA.** Other things being equal, SLAs intended to serve as legal documents typically take longer to reach completion than non-contractual SLAs.
- 6. Prior SLA experience.** The most expeditious SLA efforts are ones led by personnel who have had prior successful experience establishing an SLA. If prior experience is lacking or failed to result in an effective SLA, the development process can be prolonged and often hobbles along.

Given the many tasks in the SLA effort and the range of factors that influence the duration of each task, how long can you expect it to take to create an SLA?

Table 3 presents time estimates for creating an SLA under different conditions. While the timeframe for your own SLA effort will depend on your own unique set of circumstances, these estimates can serve as a guide and a basis for planning.

Condition	Time Estimate	Explanation
For a first SLA that's relatively simple	3-6 months	"Simple" means that the factors in the preceding list favor a shorter time frame. For example, the service environment is relatively straight-forward, the parties have a satisfactory relationship, and personnel are available and have had SLA experience.
For a first SLA that's complex	6 months to one year	"Complex" means few or none of the above "simple" factors are in effect.
For subsequent SLAs	Less time than the first SLA (usually)	Usually, the experience gained in creating an initial SLA facilitates a more expeditious subsequent effort. However, when the context for subsequent SLAs is substantially different, the time frame may be more like that for a first SLA.
For a contractual SLA	A month to a year (or more)	So many factors influence the completion of a contractual SLA that estimates can be made only on a case- by-case basis.

Table 3. Time Estimates for Establishing an SLA

Does this table mean that you don't stand a chance of completing a relatively simple initial SLA in less than three months? Not at all, particularly if you avoid the pitfalls described in this guide. Nor, unfortunately, does it mean that you can necessarily complete a complex SLA within a year. However, if you haven't made substantial progress within 3 months, or the effort has gotten bogged down, I recommend that you stop and assess what is happening.

C. Set the Stage for Success.

Focus	Contributor to SLA Failure	Contributor to SLA Success
Process	Omit several critical steps.	Set the stage for success.

Once the decision is made to establish an SLA, it's natural to want to move ahead expeditiously. In the process, several key steps are often overlooked that help to create a context in which SLAs have the greatest chance of succeeding.

Whatever activities you may deem important in setting the stage for a successful SLA effort, the following three are especially important; organizations that overlook them often pay the price later on.

Three Key Stage-Setting Activities

- 1. Assess service history.** Before making commitments to customers, service providers must determine the level of service they can realistically provide. Similarly, before eliciting commitments from service providers, customers should review and clarify their service needs and priority. This assessment process enables each party to enter negotiations knowledgeably, prepared to negotiate based on actual experience rather than guesswork.

The service assessment that provides insight into this service history entails reviewing 3 to 6 months of service delivery data, if available (or your best judgment about your service experience, if it is not), and asking questions such as these:

- In what ways has service delivery been on target — or fallen short?
- What service improvements are needed?
- What service problems or frustrations have you experienced?
- What changes would you like to make?

- 2. Educate pertinent parties about SLAs.** At the start of an SLA effort, numerous provider and customer personnel, such as the following, are typically unfamiliar with SLAs:
- Service provider management and staff, particularly those with customer contact or service delivery responsibilities
 - Customer management and staff, particularly those who have service provider contact or are most directly affected by service quality
 - Those who will be asked to review a draft SLA and provide feedback
 - Those directly responsible for establishing and implementing SLAs

Even if the above personnel support the effort, they may not understand what is expected of them or how they can best support the effort. In addition, some personnel may have had negative past experience with SLAs; as a result, they may withhold their cooperation, display resistance during SLA development, or support the terms of the implemented agreement only grudgingly.

For all these personnel, education will significantly improve the odds of success. This education may take any of several forms, such as presentations, group discussions, formal classes, and one-on-one and small group meetings.

The following topics are appropriate to address as part of this education:

- What an SLA is and is not
- The factors driving the decision to create an SLA
- How the SLA will help address existing service concerns
- The role of the SLA as a living document
- The elements of an SLA
- The SLA development process (in brief)
- What will remain the same and what will change as a result of the SLA
- How people will be kept informed of the status of the SLA effort

Be forewarned that strikingly often, those directly responsible for establishing and implementing SLAs are unfamiliar with them; in the absence of education, they may make mistakes such as those documented in this guide.

- 3. Sell the benefits of SLAs.** Providers and customers who understand and appreciate how they stand to benefit are more likely to support the SLA effort. Furthermore, it's common — and altogether reasonable — for all affected parties to want to know what's in it for them.

For these reason, both the education described previously and other communications should be framed so as to emphasize how recipients of the information will benefit. These benefits may include, for example:

- a framework for assessing and improving customer satisfaction
- mutually agreeable method of assessing service effectiveness
- clarity among parties regarding roles and responsibilities
- a context for focusing on continuous improvements
- improved productivity due to less time spent resolving conflicts
- a basis for building trust, cooperation and partnership between the parties
- greater productivity as the result of less time spent resolving conflicts and service snags

D. Pay Attention to the Details.

Focus	Contributor to SLA Failure	Contributor to SLA Success
Document	Overlook essential details.	Pay attention to the details.

This factor concerns the format and content of the SLA document. Flaws in the document usually reflect an inadequate understanding among those creating the agreement about what it should entail. It may be that any one or two flaws, taken alone, would not substantially impact the effectiveness of the SLA, but an SLA that incorporates several is at risk of falling short, if not backfiring altogether.

Flaws and Omissions to Guard Against

1. **Service exceptions.** Situations sometimes arise in which, for legitimate reasons, the service provider temporarily cannot deliver service at the agreed upon level. By treating these departures from normal service as exceptions rather than problems, they can be excluded from calculations done to determine conformance to service standards. Examples of circumstances commonly described as service exceptions are:
 - Temporary down-time, such as for routine, regularly scheduled maintenance that is confined to specified time periods and durations.
 - Environmental conditions outside the service provider’s control. However, customers who cannot tolerate the impact of such situations without serious financial consequences might reasonably request a contingency plan for such situations.
 - Customer-caused problems, such as those attributable to customer errors or customer failure to carry out agreed upon responsibilities. Be forewarned, however: determining that a decline in service is due to such circumstances can be highly subjective.

2. **Service dependencies.** Successful service delivery typically depends on the support or cooperation of third parties, such as other provider or customer departments, and outside vendors and suppliers — entities that are not party to

the SLA. In formulating service commitments, it is appropriate to identify these parties and the role they play. Service deviations attributable to these third parties don't relieve the provider or customer of meeting agreed upon service commitments; however, identifying these third parties serves an important function in educating the other party about the challenges of service delivery.

- 3. Measurement time frames.** The service standards in an SLA typically specify service commitments in quantitative terms such as 99.5% availability or number of calls per day. A common error is the omission of the time frame over which this tracking is being done. The most commonly used time frame is one month, i.e., "99.5% availability as measured over a calendar month" Time frames other than one month may be appropriate; but regardless of the particular time frame chosen, it is important to specify what that time frame is.
- 4. Glossary of service terminology.** In the absence of a glossary, people may interpret key terminology differently. Terms that have been found to elicit different interpretations include availability, acknowledge, respond, resolve, incident, support, problem, turnaround time, day, problem and incident. Therefore, no SLA is complete without a glossary of key service terms. Creation of this glossary is a joint function of the provider and customer that enables them to gain insight into each other's perspectives and to negotiate definitions that are acceptable to both.
- 5. Document readability.** If the document isn't readable, those who are not directly involved in creating the SLA won't read it. More seriously, those responsible for creating it may miss or misinterpret key information that is not presented in a readable fashion. Key features of readability include the following (and I have seen violations of these readability recommendations):
 - **Short paragraphs.** Aim for paragraphs of 8 lines or less. The longer the paragraph, the harder it is to read, absorb and comprehend, especially when the line length is long.
 - **Wide margins.** This is a basic tenet of readability. White space improves readability, and is important even though the result may be a longer document.
 - **Section headers.** People will absorb key information more readily if it is chunked into logical sections, each with its own header.

- **Bullets.** Lists formatted as bulleted items are far more readable than the same information combined into a single paragraph.
- **Reasonable typesize.** People sometimes use an extremely small typesize in hopes of reducing the overall document length. The resulting fewer pages are proportionally harder to read.
- **Use of charts and tables.** Information presented in a visual format is usually easier to absorb than the same information presented in narrative form.
- **Use of bold, italics and color.** These familiar methods of highlighting text are highly underutilized in SLAs. However, they are excellent ways of calling attention to key information and of reducing the odds that they will be missed.
- **Use of hyperlinks.** At minimum, hyperlinks within an SLA can be used to link table of content entries to the referenced sections. They can also be used in several other ways, such as to link potentially ambiguous terms to their glossary definition and to link references to attachments or appendices to these sections.

E. Make the SLA a Living Document.

Focus	Contributor to SLA Failure	Contributor to SLA Success
Operation	Ignore the implemented agreement.	Make the SLA a living document.

Creating an SLA is only part of the SLA effort. Managing it is the other part, and one that is often overlooked in the drive to complete the agreement. If an SLA is to truly be a living document, it *must* be managed.

Responsibilities in Managing an SLA

- 1. Tracking key performance indicators.** Service tracking focuses on the collection and analysis of service data in order to assess conformance to agreed upon service standards and to respond accordingly. To be most effective, service tracking incorporates two kinds of measures.
 - Objective, quantitative measures reflect *what is* — that is, actual service delivery, such as application availability, turnaround time for problem resolution, and transaction throughput.
 - Subjective, qualitative measures reflect *what is perceived* — that is, how customers perceive the service they received, in terms of such attributes as cooperation, attitude, patience and competence. When objective measures indicate service is on target, but customers are nevertheless unhappy, the subject measures will help to determine the impediments to customer satisfaction.
- 2. Conducting regularly scheduled service reviews.** These reviews require both provider and customer participation and should be conducted as face-to-face meetings if at all possible. Video and telephone conferences may substitute for in person meetings where the latter are not feasible. Email is not recommended as a communication mode for periodic reviews.

It is advisable to conduct a formal service review:

- **Monthly** when the SLA is new, service delivery has been below acceptable levels, the relationship between the provider and customer has had significant conflict, or the service environment has undergone significant change.
 - **Quarterly** when service has been stable for at least three months, the relationship between the provider and customer has been smooth, and the provider and customer are in regular contact on a routine basis
 - **Annually** to conduct an in-depth assessment of the SLA in light of changing business or service needs
- 3. Negotiating changes as appropriate.** Providers sometimes resist the use of SLAs because they fear they will be held to terms they may become unable to meet. Customers sometimes resist creating an SLA because they fear being held to levels of service delivery that cease to meet their needs. But neither party need be concerned, because an SLA, by design, permits changes that are mutually agreed to in the face of changing business or service needs.

The kinds of conditions that may warrant a consideration of changes to the SLA include:

- changing business or service needs
- significant variations from agreed upon service standards
- unanticipated events with significant impact on service delivery

To ensure stability of the SLA document and to avoid the potential confusion imposed by repeated revisions, changes should be incorporated no more often than quarterly.

- 4. Maintaining an ongoing dialogue about service effectiveness.** A well-designed SLA effort facilitates dialogue between provider and customer personnel. Ideally, this dialogue continues after the SLA is in operation, with an ongoing examination of service delivery in order to collaboratively resolve problems and to seek opportunities to improve service effectiveness.

Conclusion

A well-conceived SLA effort can significantly strengthen the relationship between the provider and customer. But pitfalls exist throughout the process that can not only prevent success, but also leave the relationship in a worse condition than it started in. Achieving success is a matter of steering towards actions and attitudes that foster a successful effort — and guarding against the pitfalls.

This guide presents some of the considerations to keep in mind as you proceed. For a list of additional resources, see the next page.

Good luck!

Naomi Karten

Related Resources by Naomi

Books and Guides

- **Handbook: *How to Establish Service Level Agreements*:** A 160-page handbook that provides detailed information on the elements of an SLA, the process of creating it, and recommendations for avoiding the flaws and failures that many organizations experience. Includes numerous examples and two sample SLAs.
- **Guide: *Why SLAs Fail and How to Make Yours Succeed*:** A guide that describes key reasons SLAs fail or fall short, and what to do to avoid these situations and improve the odds of success.
- **Guide: *An SLA Template and How to Use It*:** A guide that presents an SLA template and offers guidelines, recommendations and examples for how to turn the template into a completed SLA.
- **Guide: *How to Critique and Strengthen Your SLAs*:** A guide that describes and explains evaluation criteria to use in assessing and enhancing your SLA documents.
- **Book: *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*:** A book featuring a chapter entitled “Service Level Agreements: A Powerful Communication Tool”
- **Book: *Managing Expectations: Working with People Who Want More, Better, Faster, Sooner, NOW!*:** A book which offers guidelines and recommendations for effective communication, information-gathering and service delivery.

For tables of contents, excerpts and an order form, see <http://www.nkarten.com/book2.html>.

Articles

- Articles on SLAs and related topics: <http://www.nkarten.com/indepth.html>
- An SLA FAQ page: <http://www.nkarten.com/slafaq.html>
- My newsletter, **PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES**, which you can view or download at: <http://www.nkarten.com/newslet.html>.

Training and Consulting Services

- A customized on-site, client-specific seminar on Establishing Service Level Agreements. Description: <http://www.nkarten.com/sem2.html>
- Consulting at your location or remotely by phone and email to assist you in your SLA effort. For details, contact me at 781-986-8148 or naomi@nkarten.com.
- A review of your draft or operational SLA with detailed feedback and recommendations by email. For details, contact me at 781-986-8148 or naomi@nkarten.com.

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I work with organizations that want to improve customer satisfaction and with groups that want to work together more amicably. My services include seminars, presentations, consulting, and coaching. I have given seminars and presentations to *more than 100,000 people* in the US, Canada, and Europe, as well as Japan and Hong Kong. I've published several books, handbooks and guides, and more than 300 articles. Readers have described my newsletter, PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES, as lively, informative and a breath of fresh air. Prior to forming my business in 1984, I earned a B.A. and an M.A. in psychology and gained extensive corporate experience in technical and management positions.



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SEMINAR TOPICS

- Managing Customer Expectations
 - Establishing Successful Service Level Agreements
 - Introducing, Managing and Coping with Change
 - Introverts and Extroverts in the Workplace
 - Communication Skills: How to Use Communication as a Tool
- and more. Details: www.nkarten.com/sem2.html

PRESENTATION TOPICS

- Tales of Whoa and The Psychology of Customer Satisfaction
 - Black Holes and the Art of Managing Customer Expectations
 - Why SLAs Fail — and How to Make Yours Succeed
 - 40 Frequent Feedback-Gathering Flaws and How to Fix Them
 - Changing How You Communicate During Change
- and more. Details: www.nkarten.com/pres2.html

BOOKS & OTHER WRITTEN RESOURCES

- PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES newsletter:
For your enjoyment: www.nkarten.com/newslet.html
 - Managing Expectations: Working with People Who Want More, Better, Faster, Sooner, NOW!
 - Communication Gaps and How to Close Them
 - How to Establish Service Level Agreements
 - 40 Frequent Feedback-Gathering Flaws and How to Fix Them
 - How to Survive, Excel and Advance as an Introvert
- and more. Details: www.nkarten.com/book2.html

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A LITTLE LIGHT READING

For a set of articles that will tickle your fancy, see:
www.nkarten.com/fancytickling.pdf

PLEASE . . .

get in touch to discuss how I can help you, or call just to say hi. I'd enjoy hearing from you.

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