

Strategies

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Steps to Becoming a Good Communicator

You know good communication by the response you get. Did they nod? Smile? Sign the papers? Return your verdict? Put your work request first?

Just because you use big words, speak confidently or have a high position doesn't mean you're a good communicator. Law firms around the country competing for the brightest and the best recruits and wanting the most sophisticated legal challenges understand that good communication skills don't necessarily come with a law degree or deep corporate pockets.

When law firms survey their clients in a post-engagement debriefing, they find that "failure to communicate effectively" is noted by disgruntled clients and satisfied clients note "good ongoing communication."

Just because we can walk and talk doesn't mean we can communicate. The issue is that we fail to value our effectiveness for fear that it would jeopardize our need to be right. Rarely do we think about the possibility of being right and being effective.

Communication is a paradox. It's everything you do and say and everything you don't do and don't say. It's active and passive. It's explicit and implicit. It's subtle and overt. It's more art than science. Techniques help, but self-awareness, setting your intention and the willingness to behave in a manner that is new to you in order to get the results or relationship you want are

integral components to achieving the status of "good communicator."

An Example

Ruthless self-awareness is the first step. A client reported that when presenting to a CLE seminar, he was startled by aggressive and oppositional responses from the audience. When he examined his true intention with that audience, he discovered that he had wanted to be seen as an expert on his topic and felt that he had to declare every point he presented as the only way anyone could view it. He needed to be right above all else.

The challenge is that being right makes everyone else wrong, and not many of us like being wrong — especially not in public. The client then said, "But I *am* right and people pay me to be right, so if they feel 'wrong,' that's *their* problem."

Well, of course, it's *his* problem if the seminar didn't lead to the perception that he was someone an audience member might want to approach afterward about a referral or co-counsel opportunity. Those might have been a couple of reasons he went to the trouble to conduct the CLE in the first place.

Set Your Intention

So ask yourself this question in advance: How will I know if this communication is successful? Or what do I really want to have happen as a result of my interaction? What do I want *them* to

do, think or feel as a result of this interaction? Admirable goals are to be right, be effective *and* enhance your relationship with the members of the audience.

Another element of self-awareness is to acknowledge that nonverbal cues are enhancing or detracting from delivering your message. Communication is a process of encoding and decoding messages constantly. And most often, individuals have their own glossary of terms. Nonverbal cues mean different things to different people. Body language, accent, tone of voice, title, volume, dress and intensity are examples of areas needing to be calibrated if you want to change a result you're getting.

Sensory Awareness

A few years ago, a client at a Washington, D.C., intellectual property boutique firm told me that the most important class he ever took to prepare him to be a good attorney was a sociology elective at Princeton. He said that on the first day of class, the professor spent 45 minutes encouraging the class to talk about their college experience; he couldn't believe the professor let them talk on and on about nothing important. He concluded that the class would be easy and that the professor was a pushover.

Just before the class ended, the professor announced the assignment for the next class meeting. He told them to bring a 20-page paper detailing what had transpired in class that day. My client, in

total shock, raised his hand to say that they hadn't done anything that day but just shoot the breeze and to ask what it was exactly, that the professor wanted.

Responding with understated glee, the professor stated that many things had gone on during class that day. Some were seen, some were heard and some were felt. He wanted to know who spoke up and why. He wanted to know whose opinions and stories were more valued than others. He wanted to know which people were offended but didn't speak up. He wanted to have a description of "the music under the words," as he put it. My client was shocked. He'd tuned out most of the conversation, thinking it to be trivial, and now feared his first class assignment would endanger the high mark he had been anticipating for this elective.

After hours of doing his best to recall even the most obscure comment and divine its intended meaning, he vowed to attune his awareness to the visual, auditory and feeling world he'd previously diminished in importance.

So step two is to develop heightened sensory acuity to what is seen, heard and felt by you and others when communicating.

Stretch Your Range

Step three is to be willing to change. It's crazy to engage in the same behavior over and over again and expect that *this* time it will get the desired result. This is where videotaping a presentation or role-play is extremely helpful to objectively see yourself as others see you and to make sufficient changes in your approach the next time.

A senior attorney with 20 years of trial experience called me to help him achieve a more modulated delivery and dynamic advocacy when he made an upcoming appearance at The Hague. As an exercise to release him from his monotone and tight presentation, I requested that he *overexpress* himself vocally and facially in order to loosen up. He refused, saying it would be a waste of time to do that because he would never do that at The Hague.

I told him the point was to see his range so I could insert his highs and lows into his presentation, giving it the variety and interest he said he wanted it to have. He said no and wanted to move to a more realistic use of our time. When I insisted and insisted again, he finally acquiesced just to move the training along. The video camera then captured him doing his version of overexpressing

himself in a totally inappropriate way for a court — much less a high international tribunal — presentation.

The tape revealed, much to his surprise, that rather than making a fool of himself, he had achieved the modulation and dynamism as a presenter that he'd desired to develop in the first place. It's often the case that how you feel you are communicating and how an audience perceives you are communicating are very different. The objectivity of video can help close this gap.

And if after all this you still aren't getting the desired response or outcome to your communication, try something else. And if that doesn't work, try something else. And if that doesn't work, try something else. Self-awareness, skills and feedback will take you further down the path to good communication and more productive and satisfying interactions.



Barbara Miller of Barbara B. Miller Communications is based in Austin, Texas. For more than 20 years, she has coached, trained and spoken with thousands of attorneys in the most prestigious law firms in both the United States and London, general counsel of 3M and Dayton Hudson, trial attorneys during NITA training, and bar associations in Texas, Minnesota, the District of Columbia, Arkansas and Ohio.