
Professional Development

GOOD COMMUNICATION LEADS TO PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

The ability to communicate effectively is a basic skill that will improve both professional and personal relationships. For midlevel associates, effective communication in the work place is key to having a more productive role in the firm, getting greater recognition for accomplishments, and gaining clients' confidence.

On November 2, Jay Sullivan of Exec/Comm asked the 150 attendees of the City Bar's Professional Development Breakfast Workshop, "Effective Communication Strategies," to think about how they can communicate more clearly. "Every interaction with a client is an opportunity to build a relationship," said Sullivan, "and how you speak and how you listen are crucial elements that build successful relationships."

Face-to-face meetings are far more effective than telephone calls. Once in front of a client, how you present yourself can make or break a business relationship. Sullivan said studies have shown that 50% to 80% of a message comes not from the words of a speaker, but from their physical demeanor. Focusing your conversation — with appropriate pausing, gesturing and breathing — will give you the kind of speaking style that will allow people to get to the substance of what you are saying.

Conversational Aids

Mr. Sullivan said it is important to concentrate on your listeners, focus on one person at a time and establish an eye-to-eye connection with that person for five to seven seconds. Remember to pause as you speak. Pausing allows the listener to absorb what you just said. "Many lawyers," says Sullivan, "are afraid to pause because they feel not speaking means not communicating." To the contrary, advises Sullivan, a pause is a statement in itself that says

that you stake your reputation on what you just said.

Gestures are also important. If you are standing, keep your feet solidly planted on the floor and your arms at your side. If you are seated, sit forward, place both feet on the floor, place your arms on the table and keep your hands

This was the second in a series of eight breakfast workshops geared towards career development.

The next two programs are: January 25, 2006, "Attaining Excellence in Management: Supervision, Delegation, and Feedback" and February 28th, 2006, "Establishing Strategic Alliances"

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apart. Any other stance, said Sullivan, can cause you to look sloppy, arrogant or too casual. Once properly situated, remember to keep gestures in the "gesture zone," which is above the waist and below the chin. Use your hands to describe what you are saying.

Remember to use your voice well. Proper use of your voice means slowing down your speech so listeners can follow what you are saying and have time to digest it. Open your mouth wider than you usually do. This will increase the volume of your speech and give your voice the optimum resonance. Finally, remember to breathe. Proper breathing can control nervousness and provide relaxation.

Improve Your Listening Skills

Becoming a skilled listener is as important as speaking, if not more so. No one ever learns anything talking. "Unfortunately," said Sullivan, "many people, especially lawyers, find listening difficult because they view it as passive. They often do not have the patience to lis-

ten to the entire thought and find effective listening exhausting."

But there is hope. Anyone can improve their listening skills, said Sullivan. The first step is to become involved. Good listeners listen with their eyes, ears and body. Start by sitting upright. It shows that you are interested in what is being said. Poor posture can make you look lazy and insincere. Look directly at the speaker. Eye contact with the speaker lets them know you are engaged. Periodically nodding your head or giving the speaker verbal cues, such as "Uh huh" or "I see," can help the speaker to relax, encourages them to continue speaking, and may make them more comfortable about sharing information.

Sullivan also urged the audience to make it a practice to take good notes while listening. Taking notes forces you to concentrate and improves your memory of what was said.

Listening is Productive

A focused listener also knows how to collect information while listening. The best way to collect information, said Sullivan, is to ask open-ended questions like, "What are your concerns?" or "Why is this important?" This will allow you to learn what is important to your client. By asking the right questions you can also avoid misunderstandings. Ask "you statements," which recap what you believe the speaker had said, Sullivan recommended. Statements such as "You stated that..." or "Your thinking on that is..." allow the listener to make sure he or she has understood the speaker correctly and give the speaker a chance to clarify what was said. When collecting information, avoid "I statements," those which lead off with your own opinion.

In concluding, Sullivan advised participants to examine their speaking and listening styles. Note their strengths and weaknesses and identify areas that need improvement. Becoming a focused listener and an effective speaker are skills that do not come naturally for most. By practicing these skills and working with a partner or senior associate who can give constructive feedback, junior associates will learn the skills that are necessary to build and maintain professional relationships.

NEW YORK
CITY BAR

Forty-Fourth Street Notes

January 2006