Effective Communication Skills

Lawyers are often good talkers – but that's not the same as being an effective communicator.

Improving your communication skills will maximise your impact and effectiveness!

Including tips to increase effective communication for virtual teams…

Communication is an art rather than a science, and effective communication skills are essential to the practice of law. Lawyers spend a significant proportion of each day communicating with clients, colleagues, team members, opponents, and the courts. Effective communication skills reduce misunderstandings; increase effectiveness; remove inefficiencies; and underpin success.

Communication is the exchange of information in the form of ideas, instructions, updates, data, opinions, or emotions. There are many methods by which information can be exchanged, some of these are deliberate and others may be unconscious, including – written form – physical or electronic; spoken – face to face, remote, real time or recorded; formal or informal – controlled artefacts versus uncontrolled media such as social media, text messages etc; physical expression – gestures, body language, tone of voice, facial expressions; media – written, spoken, diagrams etc; written expression – language, style, choice of words and meaning.

Common communication skills that increase your effectiveness as a lawyer, legal project manager, people leader and team member are -

- listening actively and effectively
- questioning to ensure better understanding
- educating to increase team knowledge and effectiveness
- fact-finding to identify and confirm information
- setting and managing expectations
- delegating effectively
- persuading someone to perform a desired action
- motivating to provide encouragement or reassurance
- coaching to improve performance and achieve desired results
- negotiating to achieve mutually acceptable agreements
- resolving conflict to prevent disruption
- summarising, recapping, and agreeing next steps

Effective Communication

For communication to be effective, it is important to understand how the people you are interacting with have interpreted your message. It is not easy to ensure effective communication, as all parties convert information into meaning by using their senses, past experiences, and through the application

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of other filters. It is important to verify the receiver's understanding of your message and to verify your understanding of theirs.

The most successful Lawyers and Legal Project Managers carefully choose the most effective communication style and media for every piece of verbal or written communication.

Effective communication is the transferring and understanding of meaning. It is NOT waiting for someone to finish talking so you can make your contribution!

Effective communication combines a set of skills, including non-verbal communication and active listening, with the ability to understand your own emotions and those of the people with whom you are communicating. Effective communication can be learned, and practice will assist with the integration and application of different communication frameworks so that they become automatic and seamless.

With the increase in virtual and cross border project teams, it is critical to be aware of cultural and personal differences, as well as the difference when communicating with virtual teams.

Active Listening

Active listening is a critical skill that underpins successful communication. It helps to ensure you have accurately understood the meaning and needs of project team members and project stakeholders. Naturally, it can only be effectively applied to verbal, interactive communication.

The following tips can be learned and practised until they become second nature. Some relate to circumstances where you have direct visual interaction with the speaker, while others are more effective when you cannot see the speaker.

1. Focus fully on the speaker - includes the actual words as well as non-verbal indicators, such as tone of voice and body language. If you are thinking of other tasks, or distracted by doing emails or responding to text messages, then you may miss something that is vital to your understanding of the message or situation.
2. Take notes - these assist with the understanding and recall of key messages as it provides an alternative cognitive channel. It also conveys a sense of interest in what is being said.
3. Test your understanding - this can be applied in both directions. You can test that you have correctly understood a message and also check that someone you are communicating with has correctly understood your message. It involves analysing the messages and repeating it using words that are similar to those used by the speaker, or by paraphrasing (converting the message into your own words).
4. Avoid interrupting or redirecting the conversation - you cannot concentrate on what someone is saying if you're forming what you're going to say next. Often, the speaker can read your facial expressions and know that you are not paying attention.

5. Neutralise emotions - in particular, avoid seeming judgemental by adopting a positive or neutral attitude and body posture. In order to communicate effectively with someone, you don't have to like them or agree with their ideas, values or opinions. However, it is helpful to set aside judgement in order to create rapport and to fully understand a message.
6. Show interest - gestures and small verbal comments can be very powerful in conveying interest and attention without interrupting, such as nodding and smiling, as well as 'yes' or 'uh huh'.
7. Recap and summarise - do this at the end of a conversation to ensure you have correctly understood the key messages and assigned actions. This technique also improves the action orientation of communication by reinforcing agreements and next steps.
8. Listening with questions in mind - the following questions can be used to assist with the extraction of more interest and meaning out of presentations or verbal communication -What is the speaker saying? What does it mean? What point are they trying to make? How does it relate to previous messages? How can I use the information? Does it make sense? Am I getting the whole story? What emotions are they experiencing? What outcomes are they trying to achieve?

Non-verbal communication

When people communicate about things that are important to them, much of the meaning is conveyed in the non-verbal signals that accompany the message. Non-verbal communication is wordless communication and includes concepts such as -

- body language - posture, body movement, body position, muscle tension, breathing and heart rate
- facial language - eye contact, facial colour, expressions (smiling, frowning, etc.)
- emotional language - feelings about the interaction, the person doing the communicating and the topic
- vocal language - this is not the actual words that are being used but rather the pitch, tone, speed, complexity and meaning behind the words that have been chosen.

In a famous and often misunderstood study conducted in 1967, Mehrabian and Ferris found that the likeability of a presenter was determined by the following factors - **7 per cent content, 38 per cent vocal and 55 per cent non-verbal** (Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967). The study related to likeability and rapport creation rather than the actual conveyance of correct understanding.

Developing the ability to understand and use non-verbal communication can help you to connect with others, convey accurate messages and build better relationships. This is particularly important when developing relationships and managing the expectations of clients.

Cultural and Personal Differences

Awareness of cultural and personal differences is critical in the modern workplace and with increased diversity. There are many facets of culture to consider when communicating, including – 1. the culture of the organisation: 2. the team dynamic; 3. the culture of the client's organisation; 4. the culture of the opponent; 5. The culture of the court; and 6. the cultural backgrounds of team members and stakeholders.

The increasing diversity and 'virtualisation' of our teams, and the workforce in general, creates complexity when planning and delivering effective communications. It is useful to develop the team's awareness of both individual and cultural differences in order to reduce misunderstandings, minimise potential conflict and improve communication. It is always important to remove as many biases as possible and to communicate in a respectful manner.

Factors to consider when planning and undertaking communication in cross cultural teams include – cultural and religious backgrounds; language and accent; social and economic backgrounds; behaviour and nature; gender and age differences; and gestures and expressions.

Communicating with Virtual Teams

It is becoming more common for legal project teams to be located in various locations across the globe. And events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have pushed the majority of the white collar workforce into 'working from home' arrangements.

Well thought out communication activities can greatly improve the ability to effectively manage virtual project teams. The most important is covered above, it is absolutely critical to consider cultural and personal differences in all communication activities.

Good practices to support effective virtual team management:

1. Email virtual meeting participants wherever possible in advance of meetings to provide time to consider the objectives of the meeting and to review written materials for clear understanding when working in a non-native language
2. Conduct video conferences in preference to teleconferences to create more connection between team members. Although this is dependent on internet capabilities that may be lacking in some countries
3. Conduct video and teleconferences regularly to avoid misunderstanding and generate rapport
4. Email outcomes of meetings and phone calls afterwards to confirm outcomes and actions. This will greatly reduce misunderstandings
5. Use online tools to facilitate teamwork and contribution such as online Kanban boards and other brainstorming tools to encourage visual management and contribution from all team members
6. Conduct regular online stand-up meetings where all team members provide updates on what they have achieved, what they will do next and any blockers they may have. Short daily meetings are effective to provide quick updates, supported by separate longer sessions to work on solutions or review deliverables.

About the author…

This article was written by Therese Linton, Founder and Principal Consultant of The BASALT Group® encompassing The Positive Lawyer® and the Academy of Legal Leadership®. She is a global leader in the field of Legal Project Management and literally wrote the book. She also has unique expertise in Legal Portfolio Management. Legal Process Improvement, Legal Transformation and Legal Operations.

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Next steps…

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My aim is to inspire you to achieve great things and I look forward to joining you on your journey! Cheers….T

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