

The Art of Communication

BUILDING A REPUTATION AS A LISTENER

BY JAY SULLIVAN

As workloads begin to pick up with summer's end, it's time to focus once again on how best to impact those around you. In a recent survey conducted by my firm, 74 percent of more than 1,800 legal and business professionals listed "listening skills" as one of the three most important communication skills a leader must possess. No other communication skill was listed more often. "Conveying clear messages" was a distant second, at 59 percent.

When we think of communicating, we think of how we send out information—



Jay Sullivan, who practiced law in both the public and private sectors, helps manage Exec|Comm, a communications consulting firm that works with attorneys and corporate professionals.

in our writing or in our conversations. Ironically, it's how others perceive us as listeners that has a greater impact on how they interact with us. Consider the person at work who is known as a good listener. People seek out that person to work with, to get advice from, to build a relationship with. Think about the person with a reputation for not listening. We tend to avoid him like the plague. On the few occasions when my wife has said to me, "We're not communicating," I know she doesn't mean that I haven't been talking enough.

Here are some key pointers for building a reputation as a good listener. They may seem fairly simple, and they are. Being a good listener isn't complicated. It just takes diligent application of some key ideas.

- **Focus your attention.** When meeting with a subordinate, you will have greater impact if you give all your attention to that person for the 10 to 15 minutes they want from you, than if you spend 25 minutes with them while also checking your e-mail. Multi-tasking like this is heard by the other person as, "You're not important enough for me to pay any attention to you."

- **Maintain open body language.** When

a client or colleague presents an idea and you cross your arms, roll your eyes, or tap your pencil, the conveyed message is, "I've already made up my mind that's a bad idea," or "I have more important things to do right now than listen to you." Neither idea creates the proper dynamic for getting work done.

- **Appear engaged.** It's hard to share information with someone who isn't responsive. Maintaining eye contact and nodding convey to the other person you are paying attention.

- **Take notes.** If someone else sees you jot down an occasional word, they feel as if you are listening. Don't take dictation. Just write two or three words for every two or three sentences to capture the kernel of the discussion.

- **Pause before responding.** When the other person finishes speaking, don't immediately offer your thoughts. Ask a few questions to make sure you understand their position. Try asking: "When you say 'X', what do you mean by that?" or "Why is 'X' so important to you?" or "How do you see 'X' playing out in the long run?" The answer will help you understand the speaker's intent and will help them view you as a good listener.

- **Confirm what you have heard.** We

all hear “buzz” words when someone else is talking—words that have a certain meaning for us but may not be the meaning the speaker intends. Clarify what you have heard to make sure you and the other person are on track. A simple, “So if I’m hearing you correctly, the issue is ‘X’” will help you stay on track with the other person. Always end with, “Is that correct?” This will help make it clear to the other person that you are simply trying to understand them well, not co-opt their ideas or twist their meaning.

Respondents to our survey indicated that listening skills are essential for three reasons: to build strong relationships, to increase productivity and to communicate a clear vision. Those opinions remained the same regardless of the person’s gender or years of experience.

Relationships: It comes as no surprise that listening skills aid in building strong

relationships, where a sense of give-and-take is crucial. What we often forget is how important those relationships are when it comes to being productive. Justice may be blind, but our colleagues and clients pay close attention to how we interact with them. Our ability to first build rapport, and from there a relationship, depends in part on how well we listen.

Productivity: The survey results indicate that many people tie someone else’s ability to listen well directly to how well they get their job done. Lawyering often feels like a solo endeavor—sitting by yourself researching a legal issue or drafting a contract. In a wider scope however, being able to listen well, which inherently means factoring in different opinions, and taking into account other views, is seen by most professionals as crucial to actually accomplishing the task. We can’t complete the job well if we didn’t understand it to begin with. We

can’t offer sage advice if we aren’t open to a variety of ideas. Being known as a good listener impacts how others view us as productive contributors.

Vision: Surprisingly, participants in the survey also felt that listening was a prerequisite to communicating a clear vision. When we communicate, we tend to focus on what we want to say, not what we need to hear. It seems that most people are more comfortable following an idea if they feel the person presenting the idea was open to the thoughts and ideas of others.

We tend to start the fall rejuvenated from summer breaks. As you interact with new associates and reconnect with clients, concentrate on your listening skills. If you build a reputation as a strong listener, you increase your ability to influence others.

For more details about the survey results, visit www.exec-comm.com.

Reprinted with permission from the September 7, 2007 edition of the NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL. © 2007 ALM Properties, Inc. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited. For information, contact 212-545-6111 or visit www.almreprints.com. #070-09-07-0010



28 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036
Phone: 800.394.1700 Fax: 212.684.2688
info@exec-comm.com
www.exec-comm.com