

### ART OF COMMUNICATION

## Clear Messages Are Crucial in Leadership

| By **Jay Sullivan**

As a professional in an intellectual discipline such as the law, chances are you were rewarded in life for being smart. You did well in high school, so you got into a good college. You did well in college, so you got into a good law school. You studied hard in law school and landed a nice job at a respectable firm. All along the way, you counted on being smart as the way to get ahead. But once we're on the job, we're no longer rewarded for being smart. On the job, we're rewarded for having impact. The standard becomes, "How well can I take how smart I am, and turn it into impact for my firm and for my clients?"

During 2008, my firm conducted a survey of more than 2,000 participants in some of the communication skills programs we teach. When asked, "What is the most important attribute a leader must demonstrate," 49 percent of respondents selected "ability to communicate" over five other choices. More than half of the women who responded, 57 percent, listed communication skills as most important, compared with 42 percent for men. Among the almost 400 lawyers we surveyed, 51 percent of the women and 35 percent of the men found the "ability to communicate" most important.<sup>1</sup>

"Intelligence" was selected as the most important attribute by only 6 percent of men and 3 percent of women, across professions. Among lawyers, 10 percent of men and 4 percent of women selected "intelligence" as the most important attribute of a leader.

Does this tell us that intelligence doesn't matter? I don't think so. Fairly early on in

our careers, people assume we have the base skill set we need to do our jobs. In the law, that basic "skill" set is raw intelligence. However, the only way others can assess whether we possess that skill set is if we communicate clearly and focus on the needs of our audience, whether that audience is a large group of professionals at a conference, or a single junior attorney sitting across the desk during a performance review.

In fact, in our survey, when respondents were asked what communication skill was most important for a leader, 30 percent of both men and women indicated that a leader's ability to "convey clear messages" was paramount, followed closely by the ability to "motivate employees."<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, the need to convey a clear message is crucial. Here is a tip for considering your key "message" for any meeting or presentation. Envision that you are in a meeting or on a conference call with a key client. Let's say five people are present. Chances are, there are at least one or two people who were supposed to attend, but could not. Those are the minds you want to consider. After the meeting, when the people present leave and they run into Jack, who couldn't make it to the meeting, what are the people who attended going to say? Are they going to be able to recap your key point, or are they going to speak in vague generalities about your content? If they speak in vague terms, you had no impact. If they can recite to Jack your key point in the same language you expressed it, you had an impact, and you are much more likely to have people act on your ideas.

Clear language is the key. Yet many attorneys phrase things to sound erudite rather than simple. "One should consider

resolving this matter most expeditiously" isn't going to roll off anyone's tongue after a meeting. But "Settle the case now" will. "The company should contemplate completing all documentation by the end of the month" may convey your content, but "Close the deal by the 30th" is something that can be repeated.

A memorable message should not have more than 10 words. And, as Winston Churchill once said, "Short words are best, and the old words, when short, are the best of all." Your message should be something you can repeat comfortably at least three times during a meeting. The first time you say something, no one really hears you. The second time you say it, it sounds vaguely familiar. The third time, they get it.

Your message should also be focused on the needs of the listener. Based on our survey results, people feel that conveying clear messages and motivating employees are equally important communication skills. People are motivated by whatever benefits them most. Many business professionals are familiar with WIIFM—What's In It For Me? If your message is focused on the needs of the audience you have a better chance of gaining buy-in.

When you want to recommend action to a client, describe what you want briefly. Spend most of your discussion on why they should want it. As lawyers, we often defer to discussing the process rather than the benefits. Process-centered language would be:

We need to settle this case. We should discuss a settlement range you are comfortable with, and then call opposing counsel with an offer. I suggest scheduling a meeting with all parties. We should try to hold it here in our office.

Client-focused language would be:

JAY SULLIVAN, a former practicing attorney, is a partner at Exec|Comm, a consulting firm, where he heads the Law Firm Group. He can be reached at [jsullivan@exec-comm.com](mailto:jsullivan@exec-comm.com).

We need to settle this case. If we settle now, you can minimize your legal fees, avoid nasty publicity, and focus on your business objectives rather than litigation. Can we meet in your office later this week?

Those respondents in our survey who indicated that an “ability to communicate” is the most important attribute a leader must demonstrate, were evenly split as to why that attribute is important. In equal numbers they felt that their leader’s “ability to communicate” impacted their “trust and respect for the leader as an individual” and their “support for the leader’s vision and ideas.”

In short, the respondents were evenly split between those who focus on the leader, and those who focus on the path the leader sets. As a leader, you want to be in tune with both aspects of what your audience needs: a clear understanding of who you are, and a clear notion of where you want to take them.

There is some very good news for lawyers as a profession. Compared to other professions, the lawyers we surveyed gave their leaders higher marks for both their communication skills and their leadership skills. Fifty-seven percent of lawyers rated their “boss,” as they defined that term, as an either “outstanding”

or “very good” communicator, compared with 50 percent of other business professionals. And although no one in our survey, either lawyer or nonlawyer, rated their boss as an “outstanding” leader overall, 27.5 percent of lawyers rated their boss as a “very good” leader, compared with 23 percent of nonlawyers.

It may seem like a slim margin of difference, but given the hyper-critical nature of lawyers in general, it means a lot. Lawyers have long been at the forefront of leadership roles in society and are the first people to whom society turns when they need a voice for others. It’s why in Shakespeare’s “Henry VI,” Dick the Butcher identifies that the way to keep the crowd in control is to eliminate the lawyers.

Every book on leadership provides a different set of criteria that a potential leader must possess. There is only one element that is crucial for every leader—a set of followers. Without people behind her, a leader is nothing but unfulfilled potential. If followers are the only absolutely essential elements for leaders, it stands to reason that leadership is inherently about other people.

If you can communicate with your colleagues, clients, juries, family and friends in a manner that focuses on their needs,

their dreams and their concerns, you have a better chance of connecting with them, getting their buy-in on your ideas, and leading them where you want them to go. That may mean letting go of any need to sound intelligent, and simply be intelligent by focusing on others.

.....●●.....

1. After “communication skills,” the next most frequently selected attribute among all professionals was “integrity,” selected as most important by 18 percent of all respondents, and a statistical dead-heat between women and men. Interestingly, “integrity” came in third among lawyers, at 15 percent, after “confidence,” which was selected by 18 percent of respondents. (Among male lawyers, “integrity” came in fourth, after “communication skills,” “confidence” and “decisiveness.”)

2. “Listening skills” and “solving problems collaboratively” were selected as most important by 19 percent of respondents and 10 percent, respectively. More details on survey can be found at [www.exec-comm.com](http://www.exec-comm.com). Click on “We Asked. You Answered.”

Reprinted with permission from the December 5, 2008 edition of the NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL © 2008 ALM Properties, Inc. All rights reserved.  
Further duplication without permission is prohibited. For information, contact 877.257.3382 or [reprintscustomerservice@alm.com](mailto:reprintscustomerservice@alm.com).  
ALM is now Incisive Media, [www.incisivemedia.com](http://www.incisivemedia.com). # 070-12-08-0024



28 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036  
Phone: 800.394.1700 Fax: 212.684.2688  
[info@exec-comm.com](mailto:info@exec-comm.com)  
[www.exec-comm.com](http://www.exec-comm.com)