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Communicating Your Confidence

Make Sure Your Natural Talents Are Evident to the People Around You

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CONGRATULATIONS! You are now a summer associate. Expect to be wined and dined, worked ... and watched.

You might, like many of your peers, be entering your summer associate role with some trepidation. At this point, you probably have very limited substantive legal experience. Don't mistake that for lack of talent! Remember: legal talent, at its core is nothing but raw intelligence. That is something you probably have plenty of. The challenge is making sure your natural talents are evident to the people around you. Don't let the way that you communicate get in the way.

The firm has already invested heavily in you as a summer associate. Everyone wants you to succeed. They just need to see that you have what it takes. Communicating your confidence is how you establish your credibility. While you can never elevate style over substance, you have to make sure that the way you present yourself and your information helps people get to your substance. As a result, effective communication skills become crucial to a successful summer associate experience.

An old advertising slogan advised, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." This summer you will be making countless first impressions. When we first meet someone, we judge him or her very quickly on factors that are completely subjective and interpreted through our own personal filters: factors like presentation skills, effective writing, social skills, professional interaction, even something as basic as dress and grooming.

These are the "silent discriminators" – those factors that people judge us on all of the time, but rarely tell us about. People rarely give us honest feedback on how we have presented information, whether in a formal presentation setting or just while explaining the outcome of a research assignment to a senior attorney. And yet, whether you have done a great job or bored your listeners to tears can have a significant impact on whether that person wants to work with you again.

Dress and Grooming

Our dress and grooming are often the first factors that others consider in forming an opinion of us, but the last

thing that they will ever comment upon directly. No one is likely to remark that you look like you just rolled out of bed. And yet people don't hesitate to comment behind someone's back, "Why does she arrive at the office every day with wet hair, like she just got out of the shower?"

Undoubtedly like many of you, I am "fashion challenged." I wear a plain white shirt every day because I cannot figure out what kind of shirt goes with what tie and which suit. If being up on the latest styles is important to you, consult an expert at Barneys or Brooks Brothers – and lean toward the conservative. If your firm has a casual dress code, remember, "casual day" doesn't mean "slob fest." Everyone is watching. Impress them with your creative legal thinking, not your creative tattoos.

When You Write

When you are speaking to someone face-to-face, you have the opportunity to adjust your explanation and provide more or fewer details depending on the reaction from your listener. You do not have that luxury with your writing. Your written product must stand on its own, and in the long run, is a much more important indication of your potential as a lawyer.

The most important element in your writing is clarity. If you want to be persuasive, be clear. If you want to get buy-in, be clear. If you want a quick response, be clear. A few tips on clarity.

First, write the way you speak. Writing in a professional setting is different from academic writing. You are not writing to show someone that you know all of the big words. You are writing to convey specific thoughts. If you can't hear yourself using certain words in conversation, don't put them in your writing. "Heretofore" may be necessary in a contract, but it has no place in a cover letter to a client.

Second, write relatively short sentences; aim for a maximum of 25 words. Read your sentences out loud. If you are winded at the end, your sentence is too long.

Third, use a standard "subject/verb" sentence structure. Your writing will be more dynamic and easier to read.

Next, give your reader your answer briefly and up front. You're writing a legal memo, not a murder mystery. Don't make your reader slog through a lot of detail before giving him or her the answer.

Finally, edit carefully. "Editing does not mean proofreading. You are not looking for typos. You are

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looking for clarity of thought and logical organization. Reread your work from the perspective of someone who has not done all of the research. If at any point you find yourself pausing, pondering and posturing – “Oh yeah, by that I meant ...” – stop right there. You must rewrite the passage. You will not be standing over the reader of your work to explain it.

If at all possible, partner with another summer associate. Trade all finished work product with that person before handing it in. If an inexperienced eye can understand your message, you have a well-prepared document.

Presentation Skills

It is highly unlikely that you will be making any major presentations as a summer associate. You will, however, regularly report back to a senior associate or partner on research assignments. In between getting your assignment and giving your final report, you may have to seek clarification or ask for guidance. Here are seven ground rules to help you maintain a professional presence when presenting information.

Rule #1. People respect and are attracted to confidence. Yes, you are only a summer associate. You may be grossly overpaid for what you bring to the table and therefore a little insecure. But now is not the time to be meek. Confidence conveys credibility. Let them know you have what it takes, even if you're still in the developmental stage.

The flip side is to avoid being overly confident. Remember, you are only a summer associate and are grossly overpaid. Don't let the wining and dining go to your head. No one likes a cocky, obnoxious summer associate.

The best way to appear confident and committed is to maintain eye contact. No one likes to talk someone while staring at the top of his or her head. When you are receiving an assignment, it is important to take notes. But don't stay buried in your yellow pad. You are not taking dictation. You should be listening carefully enough to jot down a few words that capture the kernel of each sentence conveyed to you.

Likewise when you are reporting back on an issue, do not read from your notes as if you were reading from a case book. Organize your notes with easy-to-read headings and subheadings. Then use bullets for all key points. Keep the writing in the center of the page and use lots of white space. It will be easier for you to get the information without talking to the pad.

The goal here is not to adopt a Charles Manson manic stare. Because there will be plenty of times when you will break eye contact, it is important to be conscious of maintaining it when you can. Otherwise you will not have any.

Rule #2. When presenting information to someone, don't stiffen up. Just be yourself. Feel comfortable to gesture naturally when explaining legal concepts. Don't think of the exchange as a formal, structured interaction. Treat

it instead as a simple conversation.

If you are naturally an animated person, bring some of that to the meeting. Your challenge in presenting information as a lawyer is to make more abstract legal concepts concrete for your audience. Gestures, facial expressions and some vocal variety will help you accomplish that task. I'm not suggesting that you play charades and act out what you are saying, only that you act natural and speak with enthusiasm.

Rule #3. Secretaries can save your skin or make your life at the firm miserable. They are professionals. Treat them with the respect they deserve. If you get a bad reputation with support staff as a summer associate, it will haunt you well into your career at the firm.

Associates' reputations make the rounds through secretaries' networks at a pace that makes e-mail seem like the pony express. I know a first year associate at a major New York City law firm who, only three weeks into her job, was voted “most likely to be assassinated in the elevator” by the support staff. She didn't last the full year at the firm. “Please” and “Thank You” go a long way with everyone, including secretaries and paralegals.

In addition don't abuse deadlines. Not everything is a rush. If you cry wolf with rush jobs you will destroy your credibility with support staff and will find yourself without a key document or piece of information at crunch time.

Rule #4. Never walk into a more senior attorney's office with “a problem.” Your job isn't to pass difficult problems off to someone

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else. Instead, present possible solutions and seek advice. It's never "I don't know what to do." Instead, it's "I've thought through this matter. We could take position A or position B. I'm leaning toward A but thought I would get some guidance first."

No one will fault you for not knowing an answer. But everyone will be annoyed if you do not put the effort in first to consider your options. In addition, people will be impressed that you have the confidence to offer your opinion.

Rule #5. Always carry a pad and pencil when you walk into a more senior associates office. You will always look ready to work. If you are there to present information, don't be afraid to use notes. People appreciate that you respect their time and want to stay on track. No one ever said, "Please come into my office and ramble."

Rule #6. When answering questions, give yourself some thinking time to come up with a better answer. We speak at about 135 words per minute. Our brains can provide information at 10 times that rate. Use your mind's power to your advantage.

By repeating or rephrasing the question or using a lead-in, such as

"Good question," or "Key point," you can buy your brain a few precious seconds to figure out not just what you want to say, but how you want to say it.

Some people think of this as a stalling technique. It's not. It is efficient use of everyone's time. You will give a better answer to the question, and the listener will leave with a better understanding of the issues. The alternative is to greet a question with that "deer in the headlights" look that says not only "I'm not sure," but "And I just forgot my own name," as well.

When will you come up with the best answer to a question a partner asks? On the subway on the way home. In the shower the next morning. Right after you walk out of her office. In all cases, that's too late. At least by buying yourself a few seconds, you improve the chances of coming up with a better answer than if you just blurt out the first thing that comes to mind.

Rule #7. Listen. Listen carefully. Listen with everything you've got.

You will do a much better job on an assignment if you get the assignment right to begin with. In working with partners and senior

associates, I hear stories all the time about junior attorneys who did great research but on the wrong topic, or with the wrong focus. In doing so, they have wasted their own time as well as that of other attorneys. In addition, the firm often has to write off the time billed, which makes everyone miserable.

Do not be afraid to ask for clarification of an assignment. It means you are conscientious about everyone's time and about doing a good job for the firm. The attorneys you work with will appreciate that.

Have Some Fun!

You have a lot to learn this summer. Keep your eyes and ears open. If you communicate openness to learning and eagerness toward working, you will be richly rewarded.

You have already done pretty well for yourself in life by getting through college, most of law school and the on-campus interview process. Now be yourself. Let your personality be reflected in your work, and make each first impression a lasting one.