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## **Mastering the Art of Communication**

If you're like many professionals, you may be able to recall an instance at work where poor communication – whether it was something that was said in conversation or written in an e-mail – caused a problem in your office. Maybe the miscommunication affected staff morale, stoked the rumor mill or resulted in someone not executing a project correctly. Whatever the result, the underlying cause was the same: a failure to communicate clearly.

Communication is a tool that can make or break operational effectiveness in the workplace, as well as a manager's reputation. The following suggestions can help you avoid miscommunication with legal support staff as well as attorneys and others in your firm:

**Be a better listener.** Poor listening skills are often at the root of communication breakdowns and misunderstandings. By resolving to be a better listener, the quality of your communications should also improve.

On the surface, listening seems to be a passive activity, but it's really an active one that requires your full attention. Train yourself to focus intently on what the person you're talking to is saying, rather than thinking about what you'll say next or what you need to do later. Then, respond to the person based on what he or she said – again, not on what you had planned to say. It can also be helpful to paraphrase or summarize information to make sure you understand what the speaker is trying to convey.

You can also become a better listener by making sure you let the person speaking finish his or her thought before interjecting. When it's your turn to talk, know what you want to say and express it succinctly. If you ramble on, your colleagues will tune you out.

**Send the 'write' message.** As reliance on e-mail communication has increased, it's become even more critical for legal administrators to excel at written expression. Legal professionals today receive so many e-mails that these messages must be concise and to the point if they're to make the desired connection with your audience.

When drafting e-mail messages, be sure to present your primary point or call to action as quickly as possible. Few professionals have time to wade through long introductory paragraphs or information that doesn't apply to them. Stating a clear topic in the subject line is also key to helping recipients quickly grasp the relevancy of the communication to them; It can also help all parties later when searching past e-mails for pertinent facts or timelines.

Understanding the needs of your audience is also critical when drafting more formal memos, which today are also often sent via e-mail. Always try to convey information in simple, jargon-free terms that everyone can understand. You may be the firm's expert on the intricacies of the new employee health plan, but you won't achieve your goal of successfully communicating with staff members if they don't understand the terminology you're using.

After you've finished writing anything that is intended for distribution, make sure you proofread and edit it before sending, making sure to look for errors that may not be flagged by the spell-check function. If it's an especially important memo, ask a trusted colleague to also read it before sending it out. It's better to take the time on the front end to make sure your message is complete and clear; otherwise, you will be forced to send additional clarifications – an obvious sign of ineffective communication.

Although e-mail is often the easiest way to communicate, be careful not to overuse it. Periodic staff meetings and one-on-one conversations are still preferred methods for sharing information, and these interactions can reduce the potential for miscommunication.

**Seek constructive criticism.** Don't wait for your periodic performance appraisal to gather insights about your communication abilities. Ask your boss and those who report to you for feedback. If necessary to ensure candor, request that colleagues complete a confidential 360-degree evaluation to help you better understand your communication strengths and weaknesses. Act on the comments you receive by setting specific improvement goals. For instance, if your direct reports note that you're not very good at offering guidance at the start of a project, focus on improving in this area. Mentors can be another source of valuable insights.

Legal administrators need to keep in mind that communicating effectively with others is an essential job requirement. By making a deliberate effort to be a better communicator, you'll improve your interactions with colleagues while also setting a positive example in the office.

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