

A Little Respect



Legal administrators and attorneys can foster more productive and satisfying professional relationships by putting the principles of emotional intelligence to work.

BY KEVIN CAREY

The ability to recognize and act on human needs is critical to building a strong workplace culture. Emotional intelligence, which essentially involves the application of this ability in a professional setting – has five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skill. Although emotional intelligence may often be addressed in a professional setting through therapy or executive coaching, legal administrators can benefit from understanding its techniques in action. This article highlights some of the ways to use emotional intelligence techniques in a law firm setting to better manage staff and attorney interactions. It focuses on ways that we as managers can leverage our ability to reach desired outcomes and influence decisions. As law firm administrators and managers, we may believe we do not have control over our interactions with attorneys, but we actually have more power than we realize. Learning and using emotional intelligence techniques can lead to better working relations across all staff levels and make your law firm a more extraordinary place to work.

EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

When we interact with other people, it's always a challenge to communicate our ideas and emotions in ways that they can appreciate and understand. We often do not take the time to reflect on how other people hear what we say as well as what we mean.

Several components are essential to the effective use of emotional intelligence:

- > **Think about your emotional responses to situations.** Be aware of how you really feel versus how you may be conditioned to feel based on the influence of other people.
- > **Understand other people's emotions through observation.** Make note of any things they say or do that reveal their underlying emotional states.
- > **Use your emotions when making conscious decisions.** What does your intuition tell you in situations where you need to evaluate others' reactions? Any decision has an emotional and a rational basis. Consider both when interacting with other people.
- > **Manage other people's emotions.** This is probably the most important skill you as an administrator must develop, as it allows you to control the ways in which work gets done.
- > **Manage your own emotional control.** This is different from the first skill set because it means that when you are in a certain mood you can manage it without directly affecting others' moods.

SHORTCUT

Using emotional intelligence techniques can greatly enhance the working relationships between administrators, attorneys and other staff. Such techniques allow legal administrators to influence the decision-making process when dealing with attorneys who are in positions of authority and control. They also help staff become more attentive to their colleagues' work style preferences, leading to higher levels of engagement and workplace productivity.

OPTIMAL APPROACHES

Each of these components requires people to evaluate the verbal and non-verbal language that is part of any human interaction. When you see crossed arms or body language that suggests defensiveness, take a look at your own response. Do you try harder to get your point across, or do you withdraw defensively? When you hear a voice that sounds angry or strident, do you find yourself moving away or becoming aggressive? Good use of emotional intelligence means translating your observations into appropriate actions that are not passive-aggressive or confrontational.

Here are some specific ways to optimize your emotional intelligence awareness when dealing with other people, especially attorneys:

1. **Put yourself in others' positions.** Be cognizant of their time constraints and deadlines. When people seem disengaged from a conversation, they may be thinking about other things that are more pressing or require their immediate attention. Give people the opportunity to reschedule or circle back with you later. Simple introductory phrases such as, "Is this a good time to talk?" or "Do you have a few minutes to go over this matter?" give people the option to wait until they can focus on the conversations you need to have with them.
2. **Be sensitive to individuals' schedules and time management approaches.** Busy people often prefer to have set times to meet and short descriptions of what needs to be discussed. Use your firm's preferred communication channel – e-mail or voice-mail – to set up times to talk. Be specific and succinct about the topics of discussion. People generally do not need and are not interested in any background information unless it is relevant to the planned discussion. Also, give people set times (such as a half-hour) within which you expect to talk. When you meet, stick to the time frame and do not exceed it unless the other person conveys interest in doing so.
3. **Be aware of verbal and non-verbal cues.** If the person you're speaking with seems distracted or preoccupied, take the initiative to reschedule the meeting.
4. **Be attuned to individual work styles.** Plan your time with people by setting meeting times with them in advance rather than popping into their offices to chat. Informality is fine, but it can be intrusive. Even if you keep a conversation very short – under five minutes – you may disrupt the person's concentration on a more complex task. Attorneys often have very detailed documents to review and write, so their ability to concentrate without distraction is important. Setting a time to meet means that you can expect and are entitled to the other person's full attention.
5. **Create an agenda that the person can review before you meet so you can spend your time together effectively.** Attorneys are used to having all of the information in place when they need to make decisions or provide opinions. Make it as easy as possible to cover the material by giving it to them before the meeting.
6. **Use the optimal communication channel.** If people prefer to address problems or review information by e-mail, send them short, direct outlines of the issues to be considered with your recommendations for their resolution. Make your statement as strong as possible by adding the points that support your recommendations. Be objective, but add your reasoned opinions when they support the points. Avoid emotional tones that could be viewed as distracting or provocative.
7. **Let other people talk first.** Solicit their input and advice by asking, "How do you feel about it?" or "What do you think we should do?" Once the other people have had opportunity to share their viewpoints, you can build on them as appropriate by finding areas on which you all agree. Then you can focus on the areas where you disagree or need more outside information.

8. **Take brief notes of your interactions to capture the mood and emotional exchange that you felt.**

Over time, you will see a pattern developing with certain individuals, from whom you can identify emotions such as impatience, anger or frustration. Think about ways to make your future interactions more productive by anticipating these moods or reactions.

MAKING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE WORK FOR YOU

Emotional intelligence means understanding, even anticipating, individuals' moods when dealing with them. We cannot control other people's moods, but we can be aware of how those moods manifest themselves and adjust our communications accordingly.

We may think that we cannot control a situation because we do not have the power or the authority. Tenure and position can dictate administrative decisions, but we always have the ability to influence favorable resolutions by being attuned to other people's

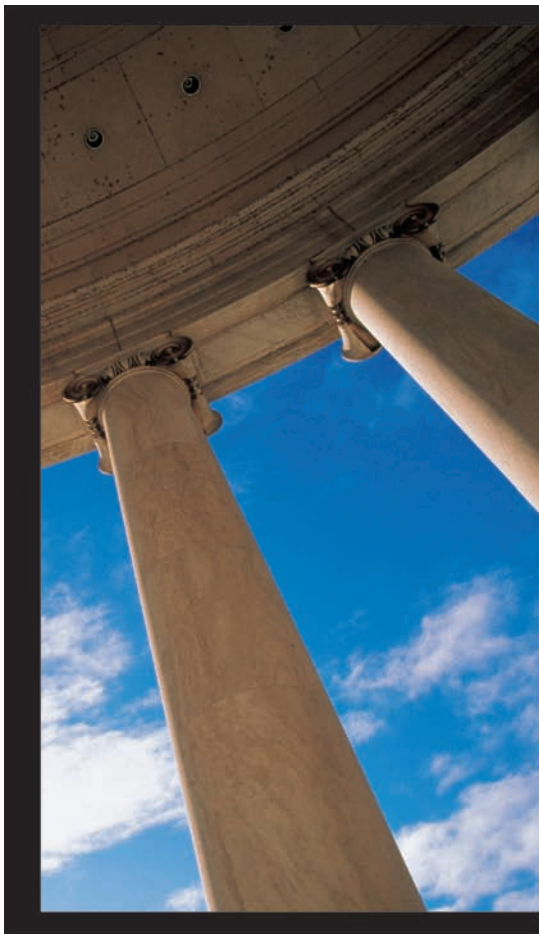
emotional needs and using that knowledge to channel conversations accordingly.

For instance, if an attorney is impatient or short-tempered, use the time management rule to keep the conversation short and to the point. Do not let the other person bring emotion into the conversation.

Be mindful of how people like to control certain situations. You can put forward your point of view and get them to consider it while still feeling that they are in control. One good way to do so is by directing the conversation so that they feel as if they are deciding the outcome. Solicit their advice, and then add your viewpoint with their advice embedded in the revised recommendation. Accommodating someone's viewpoint allows you to reach a decision that builds on both people's input. It will be much harder for them to reject any argument that includes their ideas and recommendations.

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with extensive training in emotional intelligence (“EI”), frequently assists individuals and organizations in develop high “EI quotients.” When asked which EI applications work in a corporate setting such as a law firm, where there is an unequal power base, Thompson offered the following insights. Few professional workplaces offer an equality of power across the organization. The most important factors to consider are your self-image and self-worth. Realize that you are critical to the firm’s well-being; it depends on you to manage and understand the needs of other staff and the attorneys.

You will always have some options that let you leverage your control in any business situation. A lot depends on how you see yourself and your role. Never let yourself become a victim. You can establish good conduct and behavior guidelines with other people that they will eventually learn to follow when dealing with you. Establishing emotional boundaries and setting the lead for good interactions will help you expand the firm’s EI quotient, as your staff will emulate the EI techniques that you put in place.

Some EI techniques to use at your firm:

- **Ask for group feedback after a meeting to ascertain how participants felt about it.** Obtain the information needed to motivate staff as you move forward.
- **Understand how to “read” people when talking with them.** Study what their body language says and note anything that seems out of character or inconsistent. Try to understand the underlying messages when the implicit and explicit language – the visual images and the words – do not match.
- **Keep notes on interactions with difficult people.** You quickly ascertain how to interact effectively with them – what to avoid, what to use to further the communication, etc.
- **Get input from colleagues about their tactics for dealing with difficult people.** Use your intuition to evaluate whether these practices would work for you and then try them out. If they do work, incorporate them in your interactions and build on them.

What can law firm managers do to leverage control in their interactions with attorneys. Thompson’s recommendation: Remember why you are there. You make attorneys’ professional lives easier. If your boss is busy and yet appreciates details, present a written report that is short, to the point and has a page of documentation that backs up the recommendation. That way, the boss has a choice regarding what he or she reads. This example alone uses three of the skill sets mentioned previously: understanding others, managing others and using emotions in the decision-making process.

APPLICATIONS FOR ATTORNEYS

What about attorneys’ interactions’ with staff? By nature, the practice of law is often contentious and open to interpretation. It is essential for an attorney to balance all of the EI skills in his or her practice. Respecting other people and avoiding any misuse of status, power and influence are essential to creating good interactions with people. Arrogance, self-centeredness, isolation and explosive behavior are antitheses of good emotional intelligence. Respect for others and professional and personal tolerance not only increase human engagement, but also help build outstanding work environments.

Here are some ways that attorneys can use emotional intelligence when dealing with other attorneys and administrative staff that will make interactions more productive and satisfying:

1. **Put yourself in the staff member’s place.** Think about the individual’s situation and needs. If your assistant is a single mother who must make special child care arrangements for extended work hours, consider her needs and concerns before asking her to work late. Do not assume that your assistant is “on call” to work the hours that you do. Likewise, do not assume that overtime pay is sufficient to compensate for the home life disruption. Everyone has a life outside of the office that adds pressures and stress to workplace interactions. Be mindful of staff members’ home lives and responsibilities for their families.

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2. **Do not feel that you have to be in control of all interactions with staff.** Listen actively to their comments. Consider what they say and why they are saying it. Evaluate any work-related tasks from their positions as well as your own.
3. **Think about your firm as a collegial rather than as an adversarial environment.** Some attorneys do not understand the power of working as a team with their colleagues. Listen actively to what staff members have to say. Take it to heart before you make decisions or offer your comments.

TAKING ACTION

Emotional intelligence is the cornerstone for a good working environment in any law firm – whether small, medium or large. It all begins with you and the appropriate actions that you decide to take. You can set the emotional tone and mood for the firm by applying EI techniques on a consistent and continuous basis.

It will take a while to see the changes, but they will build over time as other staff members begin to use them as well. Being able to quickly monitor your own emotions, understand others, make good “gut” decisions, manage your staff skillfully and keep yourself emotionally centered is all you need to influence your firm’s culture and make it an extraordinary place to work. ✱

about the author

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- *The Art of Communicating*, by Bert Decker
- *Corporate Conversations: A Guide to Crafting Effective and Appropriate Internal Communications*, by Shel Holtz

The following are accessible via ALA's Legal Management Resource Center, <http://thesource.alanet.org>.

- “Seven Tips for Communicating in Today's Diverse Workplace,” by Kim Ribbink – Type keyword “**communication**” in the search engine
- “Seven Communication Styles That Can Improve Law Firm Performance and Enhance Firm Profitability,” by Dr. Thomas J. Venardos – Type keywords “**firm communication**” in the search engine

On the Web

- Edge International, “Establishing a Communications

Formula for Professional Service Firms” – www.edge.ai/Edge-International-1057939.html

- Human Resources Development Canada “Improving Internal Communications” – www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m4153/is_6_57/ai_69759744
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