

Law Office Management & Technology

Talking; and Listening; to Your Employees

By Paul Sullivan

Taking the time to communicate with workers will pay dividends.

Late one Friday, a senior partner assigns an associate a research task on insurance coverage. The issue is clear and the task is to find and evaluate cases, rulings, and opinions. The associate works all weekend and produces a masterful memo. The only problem is that the partner failed to tell the associate that the matter involved insurance coverage in another state.

A partner calls a messenger to his office at 4:40 and hands the courier a response that needs to be filed by 5:00. The courier takes the document to the county courthouse and files it. The only problem is that it should have gone to federal court.

How many times has something like this happened in your office? Occasional miscues are inevitable, but if they happen frequently in your office, you have a communication problem.

Giving adequate instructions is only one part of communication. Another is giving adequate feedback. Imagine yourself playing golf with your eyes closed, or bowling with a curtain in front of the pins. That's what it's like for those around you if they don't know what you expect of them or how well they're performing.

There are really four types of communication; writing, reading, speaking, and listening. We have all been trained to read, write, and speak, but listening is something most of us don't do well. We tend to listen so we can formulate a reply, but we rarely listen to understand.

If you're like most lawyers, you're very busy, and just the thought of taking the time to sit down with an employee and discuss things seems more like an imposition. But if you take the time to do it; to listen and understand; you not only learn some things, but your employee will be better motivated and you'll have become a better manager. In the long run, you'll spend less time dealing with problems. Think of it as preventative maintenance.

Effective face-to-face

At least once a year; more often is better; sit down and have a discussion with your employees. Here are some tips on how to become a better listener when you have that meeting.

1. Set aside a specific time for the discussion and be sure there are no interruptions. It's unnerving to an employee to be in a discussion with the boss that is interrupted by a telephone call or visitor.
2. Make sure everything on your desk is out of your reach so you don't start thinking about your work while your employee is talking to you.
3. Throw in a few responses once in awhile. Phrases like "OK" and "I understand" do two things; they let the person know you're actually listening and they focus your attention on the conversation.
4. Make eye contact. This leads to a more productive conversation. Test yourself: make it a point to know the color of the employee's eyes.
5. When inquiring about current projects, ask questions instead of making statements. Instead of reminding that a project is due at a particular time, ask the employee how the project is coming along. This starts a dialogue that reveals all sorts of useful information.
6. Smiling and acting friendly may seem like the way to go, but in fact your employee may think you're not taking him or her seriously. Be yourself; don't fake it.
7. When someone comes to you with a problem, don't feel compelled to offer an instant answer. They may merely want to express their feelings and know you'll hear them out without rushing off or taking phone calls every few seconds. Once you've discussed a problem, however, don't forget to follow up later with your answer.
8. Don't let your meetings with employees become gripe sessions. If an employee is bringing a complaint, ask him or her to propose a solution. Your goal is to make employees productive team members who can solve their own problems.

Meetings that can't wait

Don't give employees the brush off when they come to you. Force yourself to take the time to hear them out. It will pay you dividends. If an employee asks for a meeting, avoid phrases like "I'm too busy" or "I'm buried." While you may be busy, their problem may be so overwhelming that it is undermining their work. On the other hand, don't drop everything or you'll create an environment where people always drop in on you. Instead, schedule a time right then or as soon as possible.

Criticism is another form of communication that usually can't wait. Always criticize privately and positively. In the examples at the beginning of the article, an employee did the wrong thing because someone failed to communicate properly. What would you say to them? Would you have criticized them because they should have known, or would you sit them down and say something like this ; "This isn't what I expected. I wanted this handled differently and I see I didn't make myself clear and I left room for a different interpretation of what needed to be done. In the future, we'll confirm things beforehand."

When an employee is solely responsible for an error, bring it to his or her attention as quickly as possible. Employees need to know what they did wrong, what the consequences of their actions were, and what the consequences will be if they do it again.

Do yourself a favor. Take the time to listen to your staff, make sure you give them adequate direction, let them know you appreciate them, and redirect their behavior if it gets off course. Taking time to communicate now will prevent messy and even more time-consuming problems later.

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