

## Communicating With Style

Paralegals can set the stage for strong communication in the workplace.



By Dorothy M. Pritchett

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Communication can be an organizational lubricant and a powerful component to drive the workplace engine. When it's good, an office runs smoothly, productivity accelerates and morale increases to higher levels of satisfaction. When it's poor, an entire system can malfunction and send employees out the door.

While communication is an essential component of every person's job, paralegal skills can set the stage for good communication in an office environment. Certainly, management ultimately accepts responsibility for the workplace environment, but paralegals can tremendously enhance the communication process through example. Skilled paralegals are detail oriented, trained to perform research and focused on developing organizational skills.

Paralegals are often affected by poor communication. They are criticized if a deadline isn't met, if work materials are not produced a certain way or if an attorney isn't adequately informed about a particular matter. Sound familiar?

These criticisms don't take into consideration that directions and deadlines for projects may not have been clearly defined, desired outcomes were not discussed at the beginning of the assignment, and the attorney's schedule

and workload didn't permit adequate time for status reports.

Paralegals may be left out of the loop regarding information impacting their assignment(s). Without having the whole picture, it's difficult to deliver

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er expected results. Given these circumstances, it's easy to fall into the role of victim. To avoid this, I recommend changing your perspective. Examine your circumstances from a position of power. What action can you take to change the communication dynamics in your workplace?

### Defining the Term Helps

In the workplace, good communication is the result of exchanging complete, accurate and timely information. The parallel role paralegals play is obvious. There is, however, another often overlooked skill involved in effective communication. Everyone responds to information differently. Some people react immediately, while others take time to think through what they have

been told. Some require details and further explanation because people process information individually. An effective communicator conforms messages to suit the style of the recipient.

### **It's All About Style**

This concept works hand-in-hand with one of the tenets of Stephen Covey's seminal book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." Covey wrote, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." This principle is the key to effective interpersonal communication. Sometimes, particularly in a demanding environment, it's easy to get caught up in work. Those who excel, though, take time to listen to others and observe the personalities of managers and colleagues. Through these efforts, they obtain insights that enable them to better communicate.

According to quality improvement consultant William W Scherkenbach, the author of "Deming's Road to Continual Improvement," people tend to operate in one of three realms: physical, logical or emotional. Most of us overlap among these areas, but one is usually dominant.

Physical personalities tend to respond well to structure. They prefer policies, procedures and hierarchies. To please them, it often is sufficient to simply deliver information in the complete, timely and accurate manner described previously.

Logical personalities typically require explanations. It is helpful to provide examples, case studies and insight into how or why a task was performed a certain way. Many attorneys fall into this category.

Emotional personalities want to know how taking recommended actions affect behavior, thoughts or feelings. While you are less likely to encounter this need in direct relation to a legal assignment, it plays a valuable role in interpersonal dynamics. Empathy, feedback and sensitivity are important. Think carefully about how you express yourself, and monitor your body language.

How does this translate into action? Let's say an attorney asked you to conduct research into cases similar to one presented by a client. During the process, you discover the legal approach he is considering is off target. If he has a physical personality, you might submit a report summarizing

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your findings. For the logical lawyer, you could supplement the report with facts or statistics demonstrating outcomes based on different approaches. Be prepared to discuss the document and answer questions. The emotional personality probably will not require different information, but more thought into which words you select and how you deliver the message.

### **Your Skills Are Your Greatest Asset**

Good paralegals are excellent communicators - verbally and on paper. The ability to write well is a quality employers frequently specify when looking for a paralegal. It's also a characteristic that appears in annual evaluations. After all, you may be responsible for drafting contracts, corporate minutes and summaries, or completing regulatory applications. My clients often request writing samples to determine a prospect's capabilities. It's hard to hide

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what appears in black and white. Don't underestimate the power of the written word. I know of one instance where a paralegal was asked to leave a contract position because of his frequent use of incorrect grammar in e-mail.

Verbal communication is equally important. Are you able to deliver information clearly and concisely? What attitude do you project? The proper tone can be as valuable as the words you choose. There is another quality good verbal communicators possess. They not only speak well, they also enhance the exchange of information by listening, asking questions and clarifying. Managing these interpersonal dynamics presents a tremendous challenge.

Paralegals play a crucial role in helping others verbalize expectations. Busy attorneys are notorious for providing incomplete instructions. It goes with the territory. You must know what questions to ask to obtain enough information to successfully proceed with an assignment. The ability to

finesse these interactions is an excellent example of how paralegals can enhance the workplace communications process.

Good communication reaches beyond the office walls. Remember to demonstrate your skills with clients.

Frequently, paralegals serve as a point of contact for inaccessible attorneys. Discuss procedures with the attorney and client. Project an attitude of customer service in direct and indirect communication, including your voice mail message.

Verbally clarify clients' concerns - "What I'm hearing you say is..."

If an individual isn't articulate, focus on what the person is trying to say. Be sensitive to tone of voice, body posture and facial expressions.

Attention to detail is another valuable skill good communicators possess. Consider what elements are necessary to produce a quality work product. You should conduct thorough research, document information and handle a project from start to finish.

### **Putting the Pieces Together**

An effective communicator combines skill with style. How does this translate into action? The following suggestions will help you set an example for others and define styles:

**Learn what style appeals to your boss, clients and co-workers.** Determine whether they have physical, logical or emotional personalities. Here's a quick litmus test. Ask them: If you receive medication, do you take it without asking a lot of questions (physical); do you want to know how it will work and how effective it will be (logical); or do you want to know how it will affect you, when to expect relief from your symptoms and what side effects may occur (emotional)?

**Help others work more effectively with you.** Explain your communication style and how they can support it. ("I need time to review information to better process it. I find written requests helpful.") Regardless of what style you prefer, communicate that you are a team player. In team situations, take a proactive role describing the best method to deliver information to attorneys and clients.

**Clarify, ask questions and clarify again.** When an assignment is made, clarify priorities and ask whether all team members understand. Make sure there is mutual agreement regarding

deadlines. When accepting a new assignment, carefully explain the nature of your workload.

Confirm how you are going to keep the attorney abreast of your progress. Consider multiple aspects and ask questions that address:

- 1 The amount of time you are investing ("I expect it will take about 80 hours to complete this project.")
- ▶ Resource allocation ("How elaborate should I make exhibits for trial? How much can we spend on materials?")
  - ▶ Direction and focus of content, particularly if you discover new information that could change the scope or position of the assignment ("Should my research only support a certain position?").

Keep clarifying priorities through whatever communication techniques the attorney values. Honestly communicate the situation - the bad news, as well as the good news.

### **Create Documentation**

Keep records regarding what formats work best for each individual. Do they prefer e-mail, written memos or weekly status reports? Communicate consistently every time.

When an assignment is complete, make a record of the outcome, as well as effective communication skills you used during the process. These files may later prove to be valuable to you during your evaluation.

Once you make a commitment, document what you promise to do and follow through.

### **Be Passionate - Don't React too Quickly**

There is one more tip that will enhance your opportunity for success. Regardless of what style works best for you or the person you are trying to communicate with, keep emotion out of the process.

It's possible to be respectful and acknowledge the other person's point of view without reacting to what is being said or how the message is being delivered. It's even possible to be passionate without offending others.

Those who practice this concept have mastered one of the most important rules of office conduct: keep it professional. In the workplace, they have achieved the ultimate communication style. LM