

THE LEADERSHIP DIMENSION

Face Time – Dealing with the Legal Profession’s Communications Gap



Douglas B. Richardson

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To paraphrase Mark Twain, everybody talks about communication but nobody does anything about it. That is, one of the most common complaints about law firm life — from associates, partners, paralegals, staff, everyone — is that “communication is poor.” That summary statement embraces a multitude of gripes about both ineffective communication pathways and insufficient communication content. The disease seems to be particularly problematic in large, multi-office law firms. Lawyers there say they do not know what they need to know, either in terms of formal communication regarding the firm’s strategy, operations and decisions, or in terms of the myriad informal gossip items people use to inform one’s enlightened self-interest. They also note that, by and large, collegiality has gone the way of the dodo. Self-interest (even paranoia) is up; trust is down.

At Altman Weil we recently saw hard evidence of the communication gap while helping to implement a large, sophisticated leadership development program (LDP) for a rapidly-growing national firm. The LDP design focused strongly on providing a group of 15 high-potential partners with highly individualized personal development tools: sophisticated individual leadership assessment, a personal leadership coach, creation of an individual development plan to help each “high-pot” (high potential leader) advance in his or her chosen leadership path — whether that was firm governance, business development, practice group leadership or developing younger lawyers.

In addition to all this individual activity, the program included a series of group workshops to cover a core curriculum of leadership topics. To our astonishment, when we convened the first group workshop, we found that roughly two-thirds of the participants had

never met before. They didn’t know each other, many were not quite sure why they were there, and most did not know exactly what was expected of them. Initially, they were wary — about the program and about each other: *Who are you? Are our roles and responsibilities interdependent? Can I trust you?*

In this case, the diagnosis was not hard: the firm’s growth had included several mergers and opening up offices far from its home office. The firm now had over 550 lawyers in 14 offices, practicing in over 60 practice areas. Clearly all these people were not going to get acquainted by rubbing elbows in the hallway or sharing tables in the employee cafeteria.

These 15 LDP participants voiced a strong and unequivocal message: *meeting regularly and personally with each other was not an incidental social benefit to their leadership development. It was a fundamental building block to creating a coherent, collaborative “successor generation” in firm leadership.* As the first year of the LDP wore on and program design was fine-tuned, this group warmed to each other, shared gossip, floated ideas and began building collaborative alliances. Their feedback made it clear that in subsequent iterations of this annual LDP, ample opportunity for “face time” was an absolutely essential ingredient. LDP design for the second year included plenty of time for “pointless” interaction: opportunity to loosen up, chew the fat, and kick-back socially, without an agenda, project, policy, process or decision-point to address.

The Words and the Music

This really should not have been a surprising development. Communication experts have long reminded us that in any interaction, well over two-thirds of all message content is conveyed non-verbally. In other words, when it

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comes to establishing trust and rapport, the music is more important than the lyrics. Eye contact, posture, voice timbre, gestures, complexion — all of these send subtle signals and communicate essential meaning. In fact, recent brain-scan research has revealed a previously undiscovered type of brain cell whose sole function is to exchange high-speed meta-data — unconsciously-processed information that serves to frame a particular communication.

These cells can contribute nothing when the parties are not communicating in person. This spells trouble where exploding law firm growth and geographical disconnectedness demand better collaboration and coordination, but the inability of crucial players to see each other renders communication more mechanical and less trustworthy. Email messages, with their abbreviated verbiage, fragmented grammar and lack of nuance, are a seriously compromised form of communication. Quick 'n' dirty, what they give in terms of speed and quantity of communication they sacrifice in terms of quality.

The Technological Slippery Slope

The fact is that we all are caving-in to crappy communication, to a steady erosion of the human component in human communication. And this trend will continue as Gen Y, which is totally immersed in technologically-mediated communication, takes center stage. In terms of the content of communication, our younger lawyers are complaining long and loud that they are not getting the information they need — about what to perform, *how* to perform, and particularly how they are performing. The cry goes out for better mentoring, for objective, competency-based performance evaluation. In every survey of their attitudes, they say they feel isolated, overspecialized and dehumanized.

They grow ever more cynical and slow to trust, as is reflected in many firms' retention problems. So any initiative that treats them like individuals and communicates with them like humans will enhance morale and improve retention.

The irony is that in terms of their *methods* of communication, a generation that cries out for higher-touch has learned to communicate in ways that have the lowest touch. They use emoticons to suggest rudimentary emotions in their text-messages. They write in sentence fragments that often omit the subject — that is, the person doing the communicating. Behind the closed door of their office, they email the associate in the adjacent office. The sad part is that it appears their elders are emulating them. Dragged kicking and screaming into the age of digital communication, they nonetheless have become utterly dependent on their Blackberries, Treos and iPhones. They shun meetings. They don't return calls. They complain — quite correctly — of being digitally-connected but personally disconnected and under-informed.

In terms of putting more face-time into communication, videoconferencing helps. The parties can size up the demeanor, expressions and visual meta-messages their counterparts communicate. The problem with that technology, however, is that right next to the screen that shows the other person is the screen that shows you to you. Watching yourself in action on a monitor is a recipe for self-consciousness, and many lawyers report a loss of spontaneity and comfort when videoconferencing. It helps span the miles, but it cannot be said to be a high-touch modality.

Face Time and Legal Leadership

The face-time issue is a leadership issue. Paralleling rank-and-file lawyers' complaints that it has become harder

to collaborate with each other is their distress at lack of direct contact with their leaders, who often communicate solely by email from distant cities. MBA programs used to describe a style of management called MBWA, meaning "management by walking around." This style rates highly on its impact on employee morale, because the followers believe they are being seen and heard.

The problem is that MBWA is expensive. As law firms develop more and more offices, circuit-riding gets harder and more costly in terms of both time and travel expense. As a consequence, many large firms are becoming increasingly top-down in their leadership style, with pronouncements communicated impersonally and technologically — often without opportunity for in-the-moment give and take. Predictably, followers feel like they are being talked *to* and not *with*.

A related problem is that decentralized organizations lacking open and frequent up-and-down communication rapidly develop subcultures — siloed groups of people who develop their own private vocabulary and communication norms. Commonly, a we-they atmosphere evolves, with "they" being anyone with whom one does not share a personal bond and opportunity to reinforce that bond through frequent human interaction. Trust tends to be low in siloed organizations where the dominant norm is survival rather than affiliation.

The Face-Time Solution

Given the tremendous economic and operational forces negatively impacting internal law firm communication, there is no going back to the old days of small firms, collegial interactions, open doors and a sense of relationship and belonging. Technology will drive us faster and faster down the road of mediated communication. Despite all the

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gripes about Blackberry addiction and email overload, there will be no Luddite revolution that takes us wholesale back to slower, quieter, more personalized communication. Friday afternoon pizza parties won't foster *esprit de corps* if no one leaves their desk to come to the conference room or if the firm is faced with delivering 300 pizzas across 20 offices. Token responses will be recognized and dismissed as just that.

That said, if legal leaders better appreciate the gravity of the problem of dehumanized communication, they can reinforce approaches to intra-firm information-sharing that explicitly acknowledge the power of relationship. All such ap-

proaches are expensive. More firm dinners, more plenary meetings of all partners (with significant time earmarked for recreation and informal interaction), more public forums with all firm employees, more emphasis on mentoring and coaching, more money spent on videoconferencing equipment, more trips to outlying offices. All costly, and all easy to dismiss as lower-order priorities.

At this point the communications gap is like global warming: its presence is undeniable and its consequences increasingly tangible and dire. While there is no going back, effective steps can be taken if firm leadership acknowledges the gravity of the issue and accords it as high

a priority as enhancing revenue, improving realization, managing collections, and developing lawyers' legal skills. True, lawyers don't like to talk much about relationships, trust, morale and "soft skills." Clearly, however, having leached much of the quality of interpersonal communication out of the fabric of the firm, it's time for the legal profession to take a hard look at these things.

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