

## **Safety First - The Foundation of Quality Communication**

By Jill Rose Kohn, Ph.D. and Lawrence M. Kohn

The pressure created by challenging issues, demanding clients, high stakes, large fees, strong personalities, delicate egos and impending deadlines is common in law firms. That's why good communication skills are particularly valuable. Quality communication minimizes errors, maximizes efficiency, reduces stress and improves morale. While the topic of communication is complex, there is one strategy that significantly contributes to creating productive interaction.

The strategy is to always create an environment of safety for the listener. This is important because when listeners do not feel safe, they become defensive. They can become flustered, angry or confused. They may withhold important information out of fear of further retribution. When people feel unsafe, they regularly misinterpret someone else's stress as anger at *them*. When that happens, it becomes nearly impossible for them to hear messages clearly and to respond rationally.

Using safety as the foundation of a communication strategy motivates people to want to respond. While it seems obvious that creating a safe environment for communication is most effective, it is obvious that not everyone is skilled in its implementation. We all witness the use of threats, pressure, disdain and sarcasm as common communication styles. And while these techniques may provide short term results, they inevitably promote dysfunction and retaliation. So, if you want to improve your ability to create a safe environment for communication when the pressure is on, here are some suggestions:

1. Be aware of your goal. If you are unclear about your goal, your communication will be unclear. Subsequently, the listener may feel confused or embarrassed for not understanding. If you want to discuss your thoughts in an effort to develop clarity, let the listener know that you are still not clear; but, you want to share your thoughts and request their input.
2. Be aware of your voice. If you're excited, make sure you're not talking too loudly. Increased volume often communicates anger. And as we mentioned earlier, listeners regularly interpret anger as a personal attack. Of course, if you are angry about something not related to the listener, you should make it clear that you are not angry at the listener, but rather at the situation. If you *are* angry at the listener, it is still not a good idea to raise your voice - especially in a group setting.
3. Be aware of your choice of words. Take a few moments before speaking and make sure you know the key words you want to use. Make sure that the words are consistent with your safety strategy. There is never room for foul language, sarcasm or blaming. These kinds of words create hostility.

4. Be aware of frowning. If you are discussing a serious matter, a frown may be misinterpreted as anger. An effective expression for a serious matter is a neutral face. The best is an ever-so-slight smile - one that implies that you are happy to be engaged in a conversation, but serious about the topic. Mona Lisa is a great example. Of course, this is not to say you should never frown. It is just a warning that it could be misinterpreted.

5. Be aware of your eye contact. Poor eye contact may be misinterpreted as impatience or lack of interest. The rule is to maintain eye contact when you are either speaking or listening. If you are uncomfortable with maintaining eye contact, focus your eyes on the speaker's mouth when you are listening and their eyebrows when you're speaking.

6. Be aware of the moment when you are just beginning to get upset - both when listening and speaking. Noticing this moment will create a great advantage because it will give you the ability to contain your negative emotions before they get control of you. When you notice that you are beginning to get upset, immediately take yourself out of the situation - even for a few minutes. Then, take a few deep breaths. Recognize and contain your negative feelings. These feelings need to be addressed later when you are able to maintain a rational state. Put on a slight smile. The calming effects of these techniques will help you think more clearly and communicate more effectively.

Maintaining a strategy of safety as the foundation of communication is no easy task. The pressures of work and personal life make it easy to succumb to indulging negative impulses. However, with a clear understanding of the benefits and a sustained effort in implementation of the techniques, you certainly can learn *and teach* skills that will support quality communication - even when you are under duress.

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