

Communicating in the Dysfunctional Office

BY LAWRENCE M. KOHN



With the pressure of significant matters, urgent deadlines and inflated egos the law office is an incredibly stressful working environment. Many firms also suffer from a collection of characters who have learned that temper tantrums, cutting dialogue and power plays produce short term results. Unfortunately this kind of behavior also produces long-term dysfunction.

I recently observed an attorney stomp out of his office and yell out, "I'd like to find someone in this office who knows something about spelling! I'd like to find someone who knows something about grammar!" The secretary who had been working on the document, rose to her feet and, humiliated in front of a dozen co-workers, entered the attorneys office to face further hostile treatment. When I later met with the attorney, I asked about the mistake. To my astonishment, it was a missing an apostrophe!

While the apostrophe was added, the relationship between the attorney and secretary was diminished to a new low. And, while it is difficult to estimate the exact negative repercussions of the encounter, you can figure that the secretary - consciously or unconsciously significantly reduced her productivity.

In discussions with hundreds of legal secretaries about rude bosses, it is clear that productivity immediately following an embarrassing incident, screeches to a halt and can continue at varying sub-standard degrees for hours - even days or weeks. Worse, secretaries who are non-productive often invest their non-productive hours chatting with other secretaries or promoting discord.

Lawyers are not the only culprits in a dysfunctional office. Secretaries too can be unreasonable, rude and rigid. Armed with the threat of harassment and wrongful termination litigation, some secretaries have come to believe that their anti-social behavior is impervious to challenge. While this situation may produce the immediate result of a subordinated supervisor, it most certainly will end up with lower salaries, fewer perks and a less satisfying work experience.

When a dysfunctional office environment exists in a law firm, it may seem impossible to make any improvement. It's hard to imagine that strong personalities will change. Fortunately, that is not the case.

In order for change to take place, it takes more than asking for or even demanding change. The participants must learn new communication skills. The key is to teach some new, specific communication guidelines that will minimize hostile communication and help everyone constructively respond to it when it appears.

I have come to call these guidelines "The Rights and Responsibilities of Quality Communication." They are based on the rules that are used to maintain communication in the process of Mediation.

The process starts by helping the parties in conflict understand

the negative aspects of their behavior and the need to change. If parties in conflict are aware of the negative impact of their behavior and are interested in improving their relationship, the Rights and Responsibilities of Quality Communication can quickly and continuously support their goals. On the other hand, if they do not want to change, or if they are irrational, this approach is a waste of time.

Here's how it works:

The Rights and Responsibilities provide a simple structure for communication. Both parties **must** agree that **each** will subscribe to the following:

THE RIGHTS OF QUALITY COMMUNICATION

1. Everyone has the right to express needs and wants. This means you may always explain what would help you in your job. You may feel free to ask any questions. Never feel embarrassed. Do not assume that others can read your mind. If you don't express your needs and wants, they will go unheard.

2. You have the Right to tell others your perception of how they are behaving toward you. Many times people do not realize how they are communicating. If you let them know in a friendly manner, there is a good possibility they will change their style.

While you have these rights, they do not provide for you to express them in a rude way. You must live up to your responsibilities.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF QUALITY COMMUNICATION

1. You have the Responsibility to be respectful. There is never a time when it is appropriate to raise your voice or use profanity toward another person. Also, be careful about subtle disrespect such as impatience or sarcasm. Even when you are in conflict, there is no room for disrespect.

2. You have the Responsibility to seek alignment. In every interpersonal interaction, try to identify plans which will help you achieve your goals as well as the goals of your peers. With just a modest extra effort, you will be amazed how you can achieve a "Win-Win" solution.

Once again, it is important to state that this process only works if both parties understand the negative impact of their behavior and want to improve their ability to develop and maintain relationships.

Learning to live by the Rights and Responsibilities of Quality Communication does take some extra time. And, in a busy office it may feel cumbersome at first. However, as with any skill, after some practice it can be quickly incorporated into a busy day.

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