



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

How to be a Great Communicator

The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply.
~ Stephen R. Covey

There are many theories and suggestions about how to be a better communicator, and we know that the art of communication, if used appropriately, can improve both our personal relationships and professional success. In law school, as in the practice of law, written and oral communication is at the heart of what we do. It therefore behooves us to “brush up” on these skills. Below is a list of habits typical of good communicators. Which ones do you resonate with? Which ones could you work on to develop better communication skills?

1. **Listen to understand:** Rather than thinking about what you are going to say or respond with, listen to the person who is speaking. When we focus on the present moment and either read or listen with an open mind, we won't miss subtle cues or what is “not being said.” Part of listening to understand is also observing body language and facial expressions. The words that people say are only a fraction of what is actually being communicated, so don't miss the large amount of nonverbal communication taking place through gestures, tone of voice, and facial expressions.
2. **Don't be distracted:** No one wants to talk to someone who is obviously distracted. We can tell when someone's eyes have glazed over in the course of a conversation, or when people interrupt us or talk over us. These are not individuals we feel safe or motivated to communicate with. It's very obvious that someone is not listening if they are texting, emailing, or focusing on something other than us when we are trying to communicate with them. This means that they aren't listening to what we are saying, and we won't want to communicate with them in turn. Curb the (literal or metaphoric) ADD tendencies and focus on someone when you are listening to them.
3. **Don't gossip or judge others:** People who gossip, or who are judgmental when they are discussing other people or situations, are not trustworthy. We all know that as soon as we walk away, that person will be criticizing us or gossiping about us to other people. When we don't feel safe communicating with people who gossip, we don't tell them what is really going on. If you want the people around you to be open and honest with you, you need to be nonjudgmental, compassionate, and honest when you communicate with them.
4. **Admit to not knowing the answer:** This is an occupational hazard for attorneys because they are paid to “know the answer.” But people, including your future clients, will respect you more if you admit when you don't know something or need

to do further research before providing an answer. Be open rather than trying to make up something on the spot because you feel too embarrassed to admit you may not know.

5. **Avoid the meaningless details:** Rather than reciting every detail of an anecdote or an argumentative point, have discernment with what you share. Repeating every little detail of a story is going to bore people and oversharing can make them uncomfortable. Stay with the main points, and main themes, of what you are trying to communicate. Celeste Headlee, a radio journalist, calls it “staying out of the weeds.”¹ People only have so much attention or time to dedicate to your stories, and if you get bogged down in unnecessary details that have nothing to do with point of the story, people will tune you out. Technically speaking, this can be an occupational hazard for law students (and attorneys) since it is often necessary for them to focus on minor details for a case or a project. When communicating with people in a social setting, however, this is not a skill that others will appreciate and it’s helpful to “dial that back.”

As a future attorney, the chances are that you are already an excellent communicator, but everyone has room for improvement. Choose one or two from the list above and mindfully practice better communication today!

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¹ Celeste Headless, *10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation*, TED Talk May 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/celeste_headlee_10_ways_to_have_a_better_conversation