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"Communicating with Your C-Suite"

Communicating with Your C-Suite—An Intentional Approach for Lawyers

Whether you are in-house counsel or an external attorney, the key to becoming and remaining your client's trusted advisor is your ability to communicate effectively. Unfortunately, lawyers often spend more time focused on analysis and results than communicating well with clients who tend to be the C-suite executives that call the shots. Communication takes a backseat to case law, the facts and circumstances of the case, deadlines, contract language or deal terms. But being intentional about the fundamentals of effective communication with executives can position you as the trusted advisor who has a regular seat at the table or is the first call that's made when a challenge or opportunity arises. What does that look like? It's a focus on the basics—how you communicate and what you communicate.

First, the how. Whether you refer to it as style, leadership presence, executive presence or some other moniker, how you communicate is more important than what you communicate. It's the difference between *being listened to (or not)* and *being heard*. Hundreds of books have been written about executive presence, but the common thread is that executive presence is about how you show up and how you make others feel. Together, they determine whether you inspire confidence in your audience and inspiring confidence is critical to surviving and thriving with the C-suite. What does presence look like? I break it down into three components: be prepared; be open; and be authentic.

Be Prepared. This is about the message itself. Before you open your mouth to say something or start typing, you need to plan your message.

- Know your purpose—What are you trying to achieve? Decide if you need to persuade, inform, problem solve, issue a call to action, etc. Tailor your message accordingly.
- Do the homework—Ensure you understand the facts, the law, and the circumstances. Spend time on the material. Be ready to demonstrate a grasp of the details if necessary. Above all, you must understand the business. Know how the company makes money; use its products and services; know who its important customers, vendors, and competitors are; and be familiar with its business plans and strategy.
- Know your audience—What are their priorities, perspectives, personalities, and preferred communication style? If you're communicating with a General Counsel or with a CEO who is a lawyer by training, you can communicate differently than you might with the CFO or CMO. If you know your CEO prefers a pre-read, provide it. The key is to think about the message from your audience's point of view.
- Plan the delivery—How will you engage your audience? Should you tell a story, ask a question, present data, use visuals? Should you practice and confirm that you are getting the message across in a way that will ensure you achieve your objective?

Be Open. This is about relationships and reading the room. Too often, people get so caught up in the delivery that they stop paying attention to how others are experiencing it. Watching for and responding to the feedback—verbal and otherwise—in the moment enables you to adjust your delivery to ensure you're on track. Always be listening, with your eyes and ears, to assess how you're doing. Are people making eye contact with you? Do they look puzzled, like they agree, like they disagree? Use those cues. Ask questions to confirm alignment or understanding. Invite your audience to express any concerns or questions. Build those responses into your talk track or email. In other words, engage your audience by reflecting that you are not just talking to them, you are listening to them and care about how they think and feel about the subject.

Want bonus points with the C-suite? Remain calm and even keeled no matter how alarming the situation, how many questions are asked, or how hot tempers are running. Lawyers who panic do not inspire confidence. Lawyers who keep their cool, especially in high stress situations, do (and those lawyers get the attention of their clients quickly when they do have to sound the alarm or throw the caution flag).

Be Authentic. This is about being yourself. The energy required to show up as someone you are not is energy better spent on listening, leaning in and engaging with your audience. Those people in the C-suite? They are, in fact, people. Don't get so wrapped up in the title and rank that you lose sight of the value you bring to the table. Use being yourself to your advantage. Younger than everyone in the room? Only woman? Only person of color? Only non-Ivy grad? Use that to highlight the different perspective and, therefore, value you bring to the table. Own it. Being yourself and embracing who you are exudes the sort of confidence that, in turn, generates confidence in you.

We've covered the how. Now for the what. No doubt you've noticed elements of what to communicate in the discussion of executive presence. Here are some additional tips that apply to communications with anyone but especially with those who occupy the C-suite:

- *Lead with the headline*. This is especially true of email. Start with the end in mind. If you're looking for approval, open with that. If you're seeking guidance, say so in the first sentence. An executive should be able to read the first (short) paragraph of any email and understand its purpose. The same holds true for PowerPoint presentations. One of your first slides should center the audience around the goal of the presentation. Live meetings are no different—state up front what you need or want to accomplish. Executives have packed schedules and a million matters to address. Make it easy for them by being up front about the purpose.
- *Keep it short*. Those same executives do not have the luxury of reviewing a multi-page exposition of the facts and analysis leading to your brilliant solution. Brevity is appreciated. If you need or want to provide the long version, offer an executive summary at the beginning of an email or presentation so that they can digest the key points and read more only if needed. Use an appendix for important but not critical information in PowerPoints.
- *Don't sound like a lawyer*. Yes, you're a lawyer. No, your emails and presentations should not include case citations, arcane references, words one finds only in the OOED, or like the person reading them should be wearing a powdered wig. Plain language. No jargon. We already know you're smart.

- *Use cues*. Cues build expectations and ground conversations. They can be verbal (I have three reasons….) or visual (headings on a page, bold text, bullet points). Cues break up information and make it more digestible.
- *Ask about preferences*. Some executives prefer emails or PowerPoint presentations ahead of meetings. Some refuse to read text messages or hate agenda slides. Figure out what those preferences are and honor them.

Finally, let's address one of the more difficult aspects of communication—delivering bad news. Many times, lawyers find themselves in the unenviable position of communicating news no one wants to hear. It's part of the job. It's also an opportunity to shine.

Be thoughtful about the mode of communication—should it delivered in writing, orally or both? Consider the risks attendant to each option but also consider how you would want to receive that information. Once you've settled on the method of delivery. Be direct. Be realistic. Be prepared to offer next steps and potential solutions. And be ready to demonstrate empathy. Yes, empathy. Just as you consider how you would want to receive bad news, think about how it feels to actually receive it and need to deal with it. Remember that the C-suite executive is a person, too, and may feel vulnerable in the moments after you deliver the news. Give them time to absorb the message. Confirm they understand what you've conveyed. Then partner with them to tackle the challenge. With a foundation of effective communication, you can turn the darkest days into ones that solidify you as a trusted advisor and business partner.

For additional reading about effective communication, check out:

"The Five C's of Leadership Presence" https://carolkinseygoman.com/the-five-cs-of-leadership-presence/

"The Legal Team and the C-suite: Collaboration at the Very Top" https://legal.thomsonreuters.com/en/insights/articles/legal-team-and-c-suite-collaboration-at-very-top

Patterson, Kerry, et al. *Crucial Conversations*. McGraw-Hill Contemporary, 2002.

"Communication is Key for General Counsel" https://www.todaysgeneralcounsel.com/communication-is-key-for-general-counsel/