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When done right, listening is powerful

We hear it all the time — there are few talents in a lawyer's arsenal more important than being a good listener.

Listening is an essential component of effective communication, both as attorneys and as human beings. As children, we are taught early on that if we listen to our parents and teachers, we will be successful. As adults, we often lose the wisdom of this powerful lesson. Although simple in concept, effective listening nevertheless remains an elusive skill and is often difficult to do well.

There is usually a confluence of factors which leads to communication challenges. First, we all see the world through our own set of experiences and predispositions, each of which act as a filter in our interactions with others. Thus, when we listen to what someone is saying to us, there can be a huge gulf between what that person is actually saying and what we are hearing. Our ability to effectively listen is also shaped by our overall feelings about the message being delivered as well as the person delivering it, either positive or negative.

We also live in a world of perpetual distraction, often making meaningful communication difficult. We are incessantly bombarded with a wide array of stimuli — the calls, e-mails, texts and meeting requests we receive every day. In our zeal to quickly juggle these demands through the fine art of multitasking, this sensory overload makes it easy for us to lose the essence of any given exchange. It takes special effort on our part to ensure that we do not pay short shrift to

others, particularly clients, in the process.

Let's face it — most people prefer to talk rather than listen, especially lawyers. There is a common misperception that those who talk the most are inevitably the smartest in the room or should garner the most respect, which is simply not the case. Rather than always trying to figure out what to say next, we should prioritize, focusing on what others are saying to us in the moment and processing that information. Listening does not display weakness; rather, it shows respect for another person and demonstrates a true interest in understanding their point of view.

Sometimes communication gaps occur when the person we are speaking with does not say what they really mean. This often happens when there is an underlying fear of how others will react to the message or when there is a larger agenda at work. The discerning listener can nevertheless capture the real message, being sensitized to what is not being said and other nonverbal cues.

With all of these communication issues, how can we ensure that we listen effectively, especially when with our clients?

First, focus on the speaker. Provide your full attention and do not multitask. If necessary, turn off your phone, e-mail and other distractions, particularly in a face-to-face meeting. Think generally about the other person, what you know about them, how they view the world and where they are coming from with respect to the issue being discussed. Think about how their position — both individually and under the circumstances — as well as their prior experiences

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may color and shape what they are saying and how they say it. Also consider how you would feel if you were that person and what you would be saying if you were in their shoes.

Then pay close attention to what is being said. Don't just listen to the words; also listen for the tone of voice and cadence, as well as for pauses, when those pauses occur and other similar cues. Watch for the presence or absence of nonverbal body language, such as facial expressions and eye contact and for posture and gestures. These clues can tell you a lot about the general mood of the speaker and how they are feeling. Do they seem happy, sad, angry, impatient, frightened, overburdened, skeptical, aloof or otherwise? Is their sentiment something they are merely

feeling in the moment or is it more of a general state?

As you are listening, also consider why the person is speaking with you about this topic. Sometimes the answer is immediately obvious, but not always. You need to determine what is being requested of you, if anything. Are you being asked to take some sort of action or to provide advice, or are they merely bending your ear or venting? Understand that the person may not come right out and ask for your assistance. If the purpose of the conversation is not immediately evident, ask yourself whether there are bigger issues at play and consider whether there are any other dots you need to connect.

This includes figuring out who else is involved and what is at stake in this situation for all of the relevant players.

As you are engaged in discussion, be sure to react appropriately. You should not only provide cues that you are both understanding and processing what is being said, but also follow up with ideas and questions as appropriate. As the conversation winds down, consider what is most appropriate under the circumstances to ensure that the other person feels heard and understood. This can be anything from developing an action plan to offering an expression of support or just agreeing to pick up the conversation again soon.

Sound simple? It can be, if you are focused and understand just how essential effective listening is to being the consummate professional. Just remember that as lawyers, we cannot deliver what a client wants, needs and expects if we do not hear what they are asking for.