Six Useful Tips for Improving Your Law Firm Communications

Communication is key to any successful relationship, and your law office is no exception. Not only is effective communication important among firm members, but it is also vital for building and maintaining positive client relationships.

Unfortunately, many attorneys find it challenging to move between their legal and office management roles, sometimes approaching office communications with an adversarial mindset. No worries though. This post will provide some useful tips for improving your law firm communications internally, which will also benefit your practice externally.

1. Delegate and Trust

Do you enjoy being micro-managed? I didn't think so. So, why do you feel the need to micro-manage your staff?

When you choose to micromanage the members of your firm, you send a message that you do not trust them to adequately perform the tasks set out before them. Once this type of environment is created, it stifles morale and ultimately suppresses communication – particularly between office staff and supervisors. Your employees start to feel inadequate and disengaged from the success of the firm. They no longer feel comfortable bringing their concerns to firm leaders, which can prove detrimental to the practice as a whole.

To prevent or turn around a communication-killing culture of micromanagement, learn to delegate those tasks that can be delegated and trust your staff members to do what you hired them to do. If you took the time and effort to hire capable lawyers and support staff, you should feel confident in trusting them with appropriate tasks. Back away from the

micromanagement to empower your firm members and reopen the lines of communication.

2. Share your Vision

Do your employees know your long-term vision is for your firm? If not, you need to communicate to them as soon as possible. When staff members know the overall vision, it helps them to work more effectively and better communicate with one another towards reaching a common goal. Sharing your vision also promotes creativity and the sharing of ideas in furtherance of your goals for the practice.

A collective vision also promotes better communication and interaction between firm members and outside clients. The unity that develops within the firm translates to better customer service. In addition, if you include client services in your overall vision, practice members will be more likely to keep them in mind when communicating with clients.

3. Internal Communication System

Employees hate email… and they hate meetings even more. So, why not implement a system for internal communications that minimizes the need for superfluous emails and unnecessary meetings? With an internal communication system, like Slack or Rocket Chat, you can promote quick and easy communication among your team members in an efficient way. Instead of having to sort through numerous emails, firm members are quickly alerted to internal communications and they are able to see them easily.

Many of these systems even allow you to create work groups and teams, so internal communications are specifically tailored to the right individuals. This type of system helps you block out extraneous communications in order to focus on those that are truly necessary to meeting firm goals.

4. Keep it necessary

When the need for meetings does arise, keep them concise and make sure they are necessary to encourage useful communication. Unnecessary meetings not only stifle communication, but they also waste your firm's money. Let's say you have an hour-long meeting with four of your firm

associates, each of which earns $250 per hour. If the meeting is not productive, you have wasted $1000 in potential billable hours.

To promote useful communication within your meetings, implement the following practices:

- Have an agenda – Make sure that you have a written agenda for the meeting. It is also useful to distribute the agenda ahead of time to allow adequate preparation by attendees.
- Watch the time – Determine ahead of time how long the meeting will last and organize it to stay within that time frame. With effective organization, you can foster useful communication within a limited amount of time.
- Limit the attendees – Not everyone needs to attend every meeting. Be sure to only include those individuals whose presence is necessary to meet the goals of the meeting.

5. A Client Portal

Poor client communication can lead to unpaid invoices, negative reviews, and unhappy clients. One of the most commonly held complaints about lawyers is their lack of client communication. You don't want to hear that complaint about your firm. With a client portal, you can promote client communications with minimal effort on the part of your attorneys and staff members.

TimeSolv's legal billing system includes a client portal that allows clients to independently log in and review work completed on their matters. They can do this without calling the office and taking valuable time away from your support staff and billable time from you. As work is completed on a case, you can program updates to the client portal… even before an invoice is generated. With a client portal, you can promote client communication by efficiently keeping your clients apprised of their case progress.

6. Turn Off Lawyer Mode

As an attorney, your communication style likely toggles between confrontational and outright argumentative. You may be an amazing orator in the courtroom, but have you paid the same attention to your non-legal communication skills within the office? Remember, your firm members are

not opposing counsel on the other side of the courtroom. They are members of your team, and your style of communication should reflect that fact.

When talking to your staff members, take off your attorney hat and open your mind to active listening and collaboration. Nobody wants to communicate when they think their words and opinions are being constantly judged. So, create an office environment where ideas and concerns are encouraged and appreciated. Remember… you are the leader of the firm and your actions set an example for the rest of the office to follow.

About Erika Winston:

Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, The Legal Writing Studio, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written messages. Erika is a regular contributor to TimeSolv and a variety of other publications.