

It's All About Them

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Lawyers and other professionals communicate constantly. Sometimes it's in person. More often it's by telephone. Even more often, and ever increasingly so, it's by email. Whatever the communications medium, one great technique will help make sure it works best.

As you communicate, put yourself in the head of the person who will receive and need to understand, respond to, and perhaps act upon what you say. Maybe this is dumb and obvious, but we sometimes forget about dumb and obvious things staring us in the face.

When someone is at the receiving end of your communication, how are they going to perceive it? Can they understand it? Have you communicated so subtly – perhaps because the subject is unpleasant – that the recipient won't even realize what you meant to say? Remember that people often try to get confused by communications, especially email. They make themselves stupid. Help make them smart.

Does your written communication feel long, complicated and burdensome? If so, consider simplifying it. Maybe you're saying too much. And also consider whether some other medium might make more sense, such as a telephone call or even walking down the hall to have a conversation with a co-worker.

When your recipient receives your communication, what's their first question likely to be? Try to answer it, at least if it's obvious and inevitable. Otherwise your communication might sound as if you haven't thought it through. On the other hand, there's always going to be "one more question," and there's a limit to how far you want to take the question-answering process.

If you're asking someone to do something, are you making that clear? And have you given them the information they need so they can understand whatever they need to do? And have you made it easy and straightforward?

Often when you ask someone to do something, you want to "get the monkey onto their back." But if you don't give them all the information they need about the monkey, it's still on your back. And you may not realize that until you realize that whatever it was didn't get done. To prevent that, think about what you're saying, and how the recipient will experience it. If you were being asked to do whatever you are asking them to do, what would you need?

Is it there? What's missing? Don't assume they'll notice and ask. Now that email has become our medium of choice for almost all business communications, we also need to think about the opportunities and shortcomings of that medium. We tend to write emails quickly, often informally. That makes sense in some

contexts, but not always. If an email relates to something important, it's often worth taking the time to make sure it's written in proper correct English with full sentences. This often depends, of course, on the culture of the organization(s) involved and the relationship between the sender and the recipient.

As a general matter, though, you should again think about the recipient. If the recipient sees, notices, and cares about typos, incorrect addresses, incorrect references to the people and companies involved, wrong numbers, and other mistakes, does that give them great confidence in your ability to get more important things right?

It never hurts to re-read an email or written communication one more time before sending it. Start at the beginning with the addresses and the subject line. Keep going until you get to the end and the attachments. Don't assume any of this stuff is right. Assume your communication has typos and mistakes in it. Fix them before you send it, rather than after.

One mistake that seems to have become more prevalent in recent years consists of dropping words in emails or other written work. Unfortunately, the dropped word often consists of "not." Anyone who writes an email or an occasional written memo seems to be working so quickly that something gets lost between the brain and the keyboard. The dropped word often makes a difference. Once upon a time, professionals had secretaries who would help with the mechanics of getting the written work right. The author of the work would take time to read it, thinking about it and reviewing it on paper before sending it. Writing wasn't easy. It was slow.

Today no such buffer exists. In the world of email, everything needs to get communicated immediately, sometimes almost in a stream of consciousness way. It often becomes a messy way of communicating, not conducive to quality or to the sender's putting themselves into the recipient's head. There's no time for that.

It's easy enough to take a couple of extra minutes – if you can remember – to think about the recipient of whatever written work you send out. It will often make any communication work better.

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