

# Managing

## Enhancing Your Firm's Internal Communication

**MARCIA PENNINGTON SHANNON** | Encouraging greater communication among all the members of your firm is one of the most effective ways to create a better work environment. Putting real effort into this important area is a win-win tactic for law firm management.

In almost every employee survey, lack of internal communication is cited as a top reason for dissatisfaction. In addition, studies have found that when employees are more satisfied, client service improves as a result. It costs nothing to improve communication, but it pays off in great dividends. You make inroads into increasing workplace satisfaction and productivity, reducing employee turnover and generally cutting the costs of doing business. Here are ways you can get started.

### Look at How It's Working Now: What's Your Style?

The first step is to undertake an informal survey of your firm's communication style. For example, does most communication between people in the firm occur through e-mail, even if individuals have offices close to one another? Is the communication too short and businesslike, lacking social

pleasantries? In this age of computers and BlackBerrys, the niceties of in-person communication often seem like they're headed for extinction.

Another issue is the frequency and timing of the communication. Most of us are so busy that we can tend to forget to keep those around us appropriately informed. In addition, partners often believe that associates and staff don't need to be privy to a lot of information. Although this may be true of some confidential matters, in general, the more informed individuals are and the more they are able to communicate with one another, the more connected they feel to their work environment and their roles within the firm.

### Get Proactive: Areas to Address

Once you've investigated the current state of your firm's communication style, you want to set about enhancing it. Consider ways in which improvement can occur in the following areas.

■ **Face-to-face exchanges.** It's important to create an atmosphere that encourages face-to-face communication. The "human connection" has been studied by Edward Hallowell, M.D., of the Hallowell Center, and reported in his book *Connect*. The

study finds that the human connection increases creativity, problem-solving ability, morale and, most importantly, lifespan. Unfortunately, face-to-face communication is often undervalued in a business where every billable minute counts. However, the interpersonal connection is essential for the long-term well-being of your employees—and your firm.

■ **Social interactions.** Many of us spend more awake time with our coworkers than with anyone else. The office thus becomes a microcosm of one's community. These relationships can help an individual weather difficult times, as well as help celebrate the good ones. And here's an added reason to take a personal interest in those you supervise: Employees will go the extra mile for their supervisor if they feel that he or she cares about them personally.

■ **An open loop about the firm.** Regularly updating the firm, or individual practice groups, about cases, new clients, upcoming work—as well as encouraging questions, ideas and even complaints—goes a long way. It allows for more open communication and a shared identity with the firm and its goals. Too many supervisors discourage individuals from asking questions. Eliminating the fear of asking questions and creating an environment where every question is valued enhances employees' professional development and improves client service.

■ **Accessibility for those you supervise.** From an employee's point of view, one of the most difficult situations is



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the inability to reach your supervisor for questions or feedback on a particular matter, especially if there is urgency involved. If you cannot be accessible for questions, ask someone to step in for you and let those you supervise know whom they can go to for feedback. An open-door policy may be impossible to keep 100 percent of the time, but try to maintain one as much as possible.

■ **E-mail communication.** Before you send an e-mail, make sure it is actually necessary that your recipients receive this message. When an e-mail is necessary, make your message as brief as possible. And use the Subject line to identify the e-mail's purpose. If you need a recipient to take some action, make it clear by highlighting it with the bolded words "Action Item," allowing the individual to see the assignment immediately. Also, don't misuse the "Urgent" message flag. Like the boy who cried "Wolf," if you raise the alarm too much, you cause individuals to no longer react in an urgent way.

■ **Office, team and case meetings.** Well-organized weekly meetings with an established agenda *and* a time limit are the most efficient. If you are facilitating, you need to strike a balance between giving everyone a chance to speak and moving the meeting along. It is very frustrating when a meeting that was supposed to last 30 minutes instead ends up lasting an hour or longer. The goal here is effective communication, not communication for communication's sake.

■ **Meeting follow-ups.** After a meeting, you should write a follow-up memo or e-mail to communicate decisions made and highlight action steps to be taken. This is a great way to make sure everyone is on the same page. Again, keep it brief and

boldface any action items.

■ **Feedback.** Immediate and constructive feedback is among the best learning tools to employ. Too often supervisors wait until evaluation time to talk about an issue or incident that would have been more usefully addressed at the time it occurred. When giving feedback, begin by communicating the positive—something the individual did correctly—and then follow up with the "learning opportunity." Point out what was done incorrectly and offer steps for improvement. In doing so, you allow the individual to learn from mistakes. Modeling effective communication, especially in difficult situations, further boosts open communication.

#### Stop, Look and Listen

While the preceding suggestions are effective in improving workplace communication, it may be all for naught without good listening skills. People want to be heard. You demonstrate that you are hearing them by using good eye contact, closely listening to their words and analyzing their meaning. Too often we try to multitask—returning e-mails while supposedly listening to the individual who has just come into our office. But are we really attending to either? Probably not. Remember the old advice: Stop, look and listen! It pertains to communication as well as crossing railroad tracks.

Finding ways to open the chain of communication in your firm creates greater buy-in from all your employees. That, in turn, leads to a series of other benefits. Do not underestimate the value of internal communication. It makes for a better and more enjoyable work environment for you, too. **LP**

#### Action Plan

- Do an informal audit of your firm's current communication style.
- Look for ways to improve the interpersonal communication in the firm.
- Encourage face-to-face communication whenever possible. The "human connection" is powerful.
- Create a community within your firm. Get to know what's happening in the lives of those you supervise.
- Share information. One of the best ways to keep employees connected is to keep them informed.
- Encourage questions. Asking questions is a great learning tool and reduces many unnecessary mistakes.
- Send e-mails only when necessary. Keep them brief and use the Subject line to specify the message's purpose.
- Hold weekly meetings to keep everyone abreast of important information. Use agendas and stick to the time allotted.
- Give immediate, constructive feedback as issues and incidents arise, offering learning opportunities in the process.
- Listen fully to what is being said, making sure to convey to the speaker that you *do* hear his or her meaning.
- Read Edward M. Hallowell's *Connect* (Simon & Schuster, 1999).