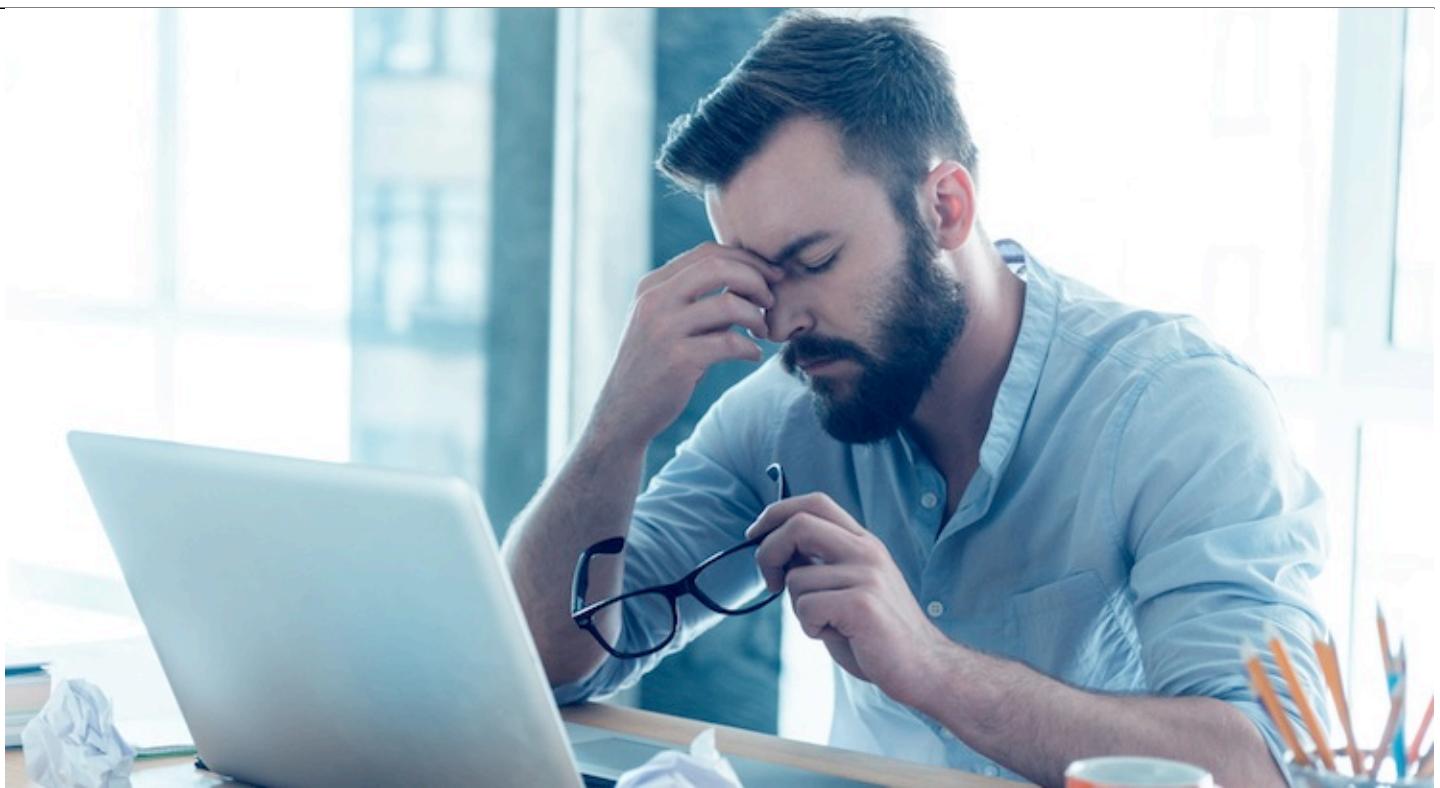# Communication Breakdown

Skills and Professional Development

My first job after law school was for an intellectual property attorney. He employed three secretaries in a suite large enough to ensure that no one sat within earshot of the others, at least not for conversational-volume speaking. The office phones permitted inside calls, but my employer did not use these. His preferred mode of communication was to cycle repeatedly through the names of his three secretaries, at a volume and tone more germane to animal husbandry, until one or more of them appeared at his door. They didn't appear to appreciate this, especially when the summons turned out to be specific to Secretary B, and Secretary A or C responded, only to be queried on B's whereabouts.

Whatever they made of this approach to office interaction, all parties understood the method and its application. Sender and recipients were on the same page. That said, it probably wasn't the best way to communicate, and it definitely wasn't the one-size-fits-all approach my employer seemed to think it was. After infancy, and absent being trapped in a burning structure, most of us are expected to do more than wail when we need help. We are expected to master an array of communication tools and options, and to choose the ones best suited for the purpose at hand.

Effective communication is essential for success in-house, particularly for those of us in a small law setting who regularly interact with a diverse array of employees at all levels of the business. Understanding the respective strengths and weaknesses of office visits, emails, phone calls and instant messages, and choosing the best one given the circumstances, is only part of it; one must also learn how others understand and use these tools, particularly to the extent they differ from one's own understanding. To be most effective, one can also have the "meta-communication" talk: a discussion about different approaches to these tools.

A few years back, I had a colleague whose habit was to send me an email, then immediately get up

and come to my office, hover in my doorway until I noticed him (occasionally deploying a little throat-clearing or shuffling if needed to get me to turn around), and ask whether I'd had the chance to review the email he'd sent me. In short, he'd pull my attention from what I was focused on. I'd invariably tell him "no," he'd make a sad face, and the discomfort baseline would ratchet up another notch for the next encounter. The solution was easy, though, and mutually satisfactory; I just needed to tell him that I only checked my inbox periodically, and absent stated expectations to the contrary, I gave greater priority to phone calls, and more still to office visits. He, in turn, told me how he prioritized things, and we both ended up much better able to communicate with one another (I took him to lunch to have that discussion, which probably didn't hurt, either).

He and I were able to remediate this issue once we recognized it, but I wondered if there was something I might've done at the onset of the relationship to avoid the complications before they arose. I soon had the chance to test this theory when the company's president departed and was replaced, and I began getting acquainted with my new boss. I took the opportunity to tell her how and when I processed email and voicemail, and how I chose one form over another based on my assessment of both the urgency and the importance of the matter. I also described my approach to designating communications as privileged where necessary, which in turn led to a good discussion about the merits, or lack thereof, of blanket disclaimers in email signature blocks (a pet peeve I might froth into another column one day). It turned out there was substantial overlap in our respective approaches, and the discussion helped set a baseline for our mutual expectations as the relationship developed.

So, consider your expectations about the communication tools you frequently use, and look for possible disconnects between you and those with whom you closely work. Decide whether you can or should improve matters by making a unilateral change ("maybe I should stop faxing people in my own building"), or whether to have a conversation about your communication with someone. Better yet, take those opportunities when new relationships are forming to share expectations and get things off to a solid start.

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