



Positively Legal: Influence Outcomes Through Better Communication

Skills and Professional Development



*If you are looking for a life hack that will have a positive effect on every area of your life, **learn to communicate better**. It is the most powerful lever for positive change because we do it everywhere.*

- Oren Jay Sofer, [Ten Percent Happier podcast](#)

This month, I spoke with [David Field](#), Canon Oceania's chief legal counsel and director of people and finance, about why good communication is one of the most sought-after qualities in the workplace and the cornerstone for success in-house.

Field's extensive experience includes over five years at Canon, 19 years at Telstra, and private practice experience, including working at Mallesons in Taiwan. With significant expertise in stakeholder management and leadership as well as business acumen, he appreciates how good communication drives successful business outcomes and contributes to personal happiness and satisfaction.

Outside of work, Field sits on the board of the [Minds Count Foundation](#), whose objective is to improve mental well-being in legal workplaces.



Field, CLO and Director of People and Finance, Canon Oceania

Field understands the importance of positive practices for his own well-being to “recharge and recover from the week.” Describing himself as a “fanatical photographer,” Field combines his longstanding passion for wildlife and landscape photography with hiking and off-track exploration and navigation. He can be found hiking most Saturdays in national parks regardless of the weather. “It is an amazing feeling to be in the middle of nowhere in a national park, miles from anyone, dealing with some very practical, real-world problems that don’t leave you much room to worry about work,” Field says.

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In recent COVID lockdowns, Field has reinvigorated his high-school passion for coding as “a surprisingly good way to create meaning and challenge outside of work,” he says. “I find it quite stressful when I am trying to solve a complex coding problem, but it’s a very different sort of stress from work, and very rewarding when you finally solve a tough problem.”

While Field’s sustained, positive interventions keep him focused and help him to [avoid burnout](#), they also help him to develop strong stakeholder relationships, navigate difficult conversations, and ultimately influence good commercial outcomes.

As Adam Grant discussed in [a recent Harvard Business Review article](#), “If Steve Jobs had not surrounded himself with people who knew how to change his mind, he might not have changed the world.”

Good communication influences outcomes

In-house lawyers serve companies, not individual clients. This necessitates de-prioritizing some work requests (or not doing them at all) and legitimately pushing back on work internal clients should be doing in the first place (or suggesting they redo poorly done work they assume the lawyer will fix).

Field acknowledges that “while some clients need to be stopped (including those who present unacceptable legal and regulatory risk), most just need to be steered in the right direction, helping them to achieve their legitimate objectives and deliver a better medium and long-term outcome.”

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Field continues, “In-house clients can generally cope with the idea that their work won’t be done now, or in fact may never be done, if you can explain to them why other work is more of a priority and give them a way forward. But this isn’t easy.”

Field acknowledges the challenge for lawyers who work hard but feel like their clients are constantly complaining and don’t appreciate their efforts. “So much of the in-house lawyer’s role is about influencing for better outcomes,” he says. “To do that you absolutely need to invest in building influence with your clients – you need to spend time understanding them, their business, and their drivers.”

How do lawyers hold their clients accountable and push back on low-priority tasks while maintaining strong stakeholder relationships? How do lawyers also step back and engage in uncomfortable discussions without frustrating their stakeholders’ legitimate expectations?

The key is good communication.

Learning to communicate better

[Oren Jay Sofer](#), author of [Say What You Mean](#), described “good communication” as a learnable skill and “one of the [most essential skills for a meaningful life](#).”

There are various ways to improve your communication.

Be meaningful

Implement Sofer’s [five core practices](#) for meaningful communication. These include giving the other person your full attention, listening completely, genuinely trying to understand rather than wanting to be right, focusing on what matters, and pausing/staying silent.

The same skills apply to email and social media. As they are “generally tone-deaf mediums,” Sofer suggests waiting a few hours or a day before sending or posting. While it may seem counterintuitive, building in additional time before sending an email may actually save time that would be spent later clearing up misunderstandings and repairing stakeholder relationships. “If there is anything emotionally charged about the interaction, pick up the phone or get together,” [Sofer advises](#).

Find commonalities

The article "[Harnessing the Science of Persuasion](#)" suggests finding similarities like hobbies to create a genuine bond with others because “it creates a presumption of goodwill and trustworthiness in every subsequent encounter” and makes it easier to “build support for a new project.”

Another article, "[Three Things Managers Should be Doing Every Day](#)," similarly suggests using routine activities such as regular meetings to build a strong network. Field agrees with the investment of time in getting to know colleagues and clients: “In one of the most high-performing senior leadership teams I was ever involved in, we explicitly invested time understanding each other,

because we knew that the resulting high levels of trust were good for the business.”

General counsel can also encourage their team members to join committees or substitute them into routine meetings to build strong connections with stakeholders and build goodwill.

Rehearse hard conversations

In the article "[Taking the Stress Out of Stressful Conversations](#)," the authors suggest rehearsing a stressful conversation with a neutral friend to help remove emotions from the situation and “fine-tune the phrasing” for the actual conversation. General counsel and managers could allow time into their regular team meetings or one-on-ones to workshop problem scenarios with their lawyers.

Adjust your lens

The article "[The Secret to Dealing with Difficult People: It's About You](#)" discusses how to deal with people who trigger us (for example, if they don't listen, or they take credit for our work), noting “our core emotional need to is to feel valued and valuable.” The author suggests not succumbing to the “seductive pull” of playing the victim, and instead trying to look at the situation through one of these lenses:

- **Realistic optimism lens:** Moving beyond feeling under attack and considering if there is an alternative way of viewing the situation.
- **Reverse lens:** Looking at the world through the lens of the other person and asking how they feel and in what ways it might make sense.
- **Long lens:** Considering how we can learn and grow from a negative experience.

The book [How to Win Friends and Influence People](#) includes six ways to make people like us – becoming genuinely interested in other people, smiling, remembering the other person's name, being a good listener, talking about the other person's interests, and making the other person feel important (and doing it sincerely).

Debate

In *Think Again*, Grant suggested reframing disagreement as a debate because people are more likely to approach it intellectually and less likely to take it personally. He also suggested practicing the art of persuasive listening saying that “when we are trying to open other people's minds, we can frequently accomplish more by listening than by talking.”

In his new book, [The Art of Insubordination](#), Kashdan suggested ways people can maximize the potential of their message, including sparking their curiosity rather than their fear (because people are unlikely to listen to anyone who frightens them regardless of how good their idea may be) and making statements that “appear objective and verifiable.”

Thriving with better communication

Field suggests reframing your role, and the impact of your influence within your company.

One of the most critical things to maximize your effectiveness as an in-house lawyer is realizing that your business actually has no interest in practicing law. For most stakeholders in

the business, the law is just a means to an end. The business needs law because it wants to serve customers responsibly and ethically, protect and enhance its reputation, maintain its social license to operate, and present to customers as competent, professional, and easy to do business with. When you keep that in mind, it changes the way you perform your role as a lawyer and communicate with your clients and stakeholders.

- David Field, CLO and Director of People and Finance, Canon Oceania

Lawyers spend a lot of time and energy at work. It makes sense that they will thrive personally and professionally if they can maintain positive relationships with their stakeholders. In-house counsel can feel proud of their service and contribution by influencing commercial outcomes. Good communication is key.

As Field notes, “If you are confident about your value-add, manage clients’ expectations about how they work with you, and hold clients accountable for doing their job and meeting their commitments, you can actually have much more fulfilling and high-performing relationships in the workplace.”

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Caterina Cavallaro is associate general counsel at VGW.

She combines technical legal skills with practical business understanding and a love of innovation, project management, and legal technology to improve ways of working within the legal industry. She is a member of the ACC's In-House In-Health and Legal Technology and Innovation Special Interest

Groups.

In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.