

Remote Collaboration: 3 Ways General Counsel Can Improve their Communication Skills

Law Department Management

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce





COVID-19 has created new work realities for legal professionals who require enhanced remote communication skills, much like those I developed during my first months as a new legal leader at a global organization.

In that role, I worked extensively with Kim, a lawyer in the company's APAC legal division. Kim's workday in Japan was ending just as mine in California began. Initially, I knew Kim only through her succinctly written emails and documents. As we all know, we miss important social cues from facial expressions and body language when relying solely on text to communicate. So, I was excited when Kim and I were finally able to share our ideas during a video call.

But video calls may also be misleading if we're not careful. Being an expressive American, I often speak enthusiastically, arching my eyebrows, smiling eagerly, and nodding my head. Kim's Japanese culture, however, frowns on the outward expression of emotions. Kim could have seen me as coming on too strongly. And her comparatively muted response might've felt like a rebuke to me.

Instead, Kim and I committed to actively listening to each other and understanding each other's culture. We acknowledged that humans are hardwired to pay attention to body language, and we automatically make assumptions based on facial expressions or phrasing in emails.

Becoming aware of our assumptions allowed us to set them aside. A deep rapport developed between us. We also used technology tools to purposely maintain healthy relationships with others. Our efforts significantly helped me as a new legal leader, and Kim as my counterpart across the globe, drive greater value for the entire organization. Here's how you can do the same:

1. Active listening

Active listening starts before anyone speaks. It requires that you plan and ask specific questions designed to elicit revealing details in the response. One of your first goals as a new legal leader is to understand the company's organizational structure and communication channels. What processes are in place to ensure the flow of critical information?

You also need to develop a working knowledge of business strategies for areas such as workforce management, general operations, growth initiatives, supply chain, trade, and finance.

As you talk with executive teams, colleagues, and board members, ask specific questions that extract detailed answers that can help you overcome your natural assumptions. What are the priorities for each team? How have they overcome prior challenges? What strategies are working for them now?

Active listening also requires forethought in recognizing then setting aside assumptions that give rise to misunderstandings. You may even voice your assumptions to dig deeper and move beyond them.

Propose a potential solution, then draw others in by asking for more specific details on why it will or won't work. Throughout all your discussions, ask for clarification and repeat what you hear to verify and acknowledge your understanding.

2. Build mutually beneficial relationships

A mutually beneficial relationship grew between Kim and me that produced eye-opening results. At my new position, I had spent weeks mapping the company's law firm relationships, only to discover later that Kim already maintained an extensive spreadsheet with the same information. She and I discovered several more areas where redundant efforts in our respective offices were wasting limited resources. Going forward, we shared more resources and streamlined processes to help both our departments work smarter, not harder.

Those systems then spread among other divisions to reduce legal spend across the corporation. The systems your organization develops will be unique to its needs. But their underlying strengths — and weaknesses — will stem from the relationships they are built to reinforce. Also, you need the buy-in and support of others when advocating for and rolling out changes.

Kim and I sought to develop balanced approaches to change initiatives. We succeeded because we had built strong relationships with the leadership team, clients, and others. Individuals felt understood when she or I actively asked for their input and listened to their concerns.

We also — and this is key — showed everyone our appreciation for their contributions and made sure to give credit to others where it was due. In return, stakeholders were willing to consider issues from multiple perspectives and often came up with their own strategies for compromise when needed.

3. Create shared systems of engagement with technology

Kim and I continued to hold regular video chats while also relying on other technology tools such as Contract Management Software (CMS) to ease our collaborations with each other as well as when working with other divisions and departments around the world.

Digital communications within shared CMS platforms occur as if participants are sitting around the same table, sharing a single screen. That closeness not only expedites projects, but it also enhances a sense of community, support, and preparedness.

CMS platforms allow multiple stakeholders from inside and outside an organization to discuss concerns, plan activities, and work through document revisions in real-time and in an open and transparent environment that is ideal for building trust. CMS system features track individual activities and permanently capture conversations, leaving an auditable trail that gives others insight and clarity into historical developments for years to come.

Building the future with remote communications

Like collaborating with my colleague Kim across the world, the coronavirus work from home mandates have shown us that no matter how far apart we are physically, we’re all still very much connected. Remote communication tools bring us together, but new legal leaders still need to ask the right questions, actively listen to others, and set aside any assumptions to accurately assess the lay of the land.

Maintaining healthy relationships allows you to share your legal guidance more effectively as well as benefit from the experience, expertise, and resources of others. Relying on technology such as CMS platforms to eliminate geographical barriers and engage with others helps you stay on top of developments and discover new opportunities to provide value far into the future.

For more advice on the coronavirus pandemic, visit ACC's COVID-19 Resource Center.

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