



3 Ways to Demonstrate Value Through Communication

Skills and Professional Development



As legal counsel, we spend most of our days communicating with our business partners, colleagues, opposing counsel, and many other stakeholders. Whether it's writing an email, drafting a contract, or advising our clients over the phone (or Zoom), we provide our value through resolving issues and

explaining risk mitigation processes through communicating. A significant portion of our careers is based on understanding information presented to us and communicating information back to support our organizations to make important decisions.

We believe that our role is critical to the business. But for some, it may not be as evident. Lawyers are often perceived in a negative light: pretentious, arrogant, and sealed in a vacuum, speaking their own language. Although [ACC's Chief Legal Officers \(CLO\) Survey](#) articulates that four out of five CLOs report directly to the CEO of the organization, demonstrating that our services are critical to the business, ensuring we maintain that level of engagement at all levels of the business is also important.

As a lawyer for a university, I deal with various people — academics, administrative staff, senior management, and corporates — some who are familiar with legal concepts and others who hear “indemnity” and think it’s a disease. As such, I’ve found that there are three key things that have helped me to improve my communication, provided assistance, and demonstrated my value to the organization.

1. Speak the language of the business

Every organization has its own way of speaking. There are concepts and issues that are specific to those industries and businesses and it’s important for legal counsel to use this terminology to play on the same level as their business partners.

At the university where I work, we certainly have our own language that uses strings of acronyms. When most people hear “VC,” they think “venture capital,” but in a university it means “Vice Chancellor.” The term “DVCR” may sound like the latest form of technology to watch movies, but in this field, means “Deputy Vice Chancellor of Research.”

For me, being able to speak the language as my colleagues demonstrates my knowledge of the sector and the organization for which I work.

In addition to speaking the organization’s language, it’s also important to speak the same language as the business unit you are advising. For example, if you are speaking with the marketing department, try using terms such as “talent release forms” instead of “privacy consent forms.”

Using terminology that they may be familiar with such as “leads,” “CRM,” or “the brand” allows you to build your relationship because it shows that you listen to them. Listening to those who you are working with allows for a relationship for trust to form, ultimately assisting you to become part of the business decisions

2. Keep it simple

Once upon a time when we were law students, it probably made sense to use Latin, speak in technical legal language, and recite case law because it assisted us to demonstrate our legal knowledge to our professors. The problem is, when you’re in-house, your knowledge is assumed, and you are there to provide advice and support.

Our legal communications need to be clear enough to understand and succinct to allow busy people to make a decision. It’s all about using “plain English.” From the book *Clear and Concise* by Susan

McKerihan, she states,

“Using plain English enables the reader to focus on the message, rather than being distracted by difficult language or complicated sentences.”

By articulating our legal advice to our business partners in plain English, it demonstrates that while we are experts in our field or a particular area of law, we are also skilled in explaining complex messages clearly, which benefits everyone!

Using plain English doesn't mean dumbing the message down though. I know that my academic clients are incredibly talented, but are not experts in the area of law. So, I use some technical terminology and discuss complex subjects but articulating it in everyday "concrete" words, rather than abstract terms that sound intelligent.

3. Structure it

Often the way we present information affects how others may digest it. With people receiving on average 122 work emails daily, and 112.5 billion business emails sent each day, it's difficult to get the attention of the reader when your email is just another in the pile.

I've often dreaded receiving those long emails in one singular block of text dropping into my inbox — I struggle to understand what's going on and it requires more concentration to figure out if I need to action something from it.

Often using headings, bullet points, and short sentences are useful, practical ways to make your emails more digestible. Another method I've adopted is the “What? So what? Now what?” approach to presenting legal advice.

- **What?** is where you pose the question you've been asked and some basic facts.
- **So what?** is the application of the law, the organizational circumstances, and the facts together.
- **Now what?** is the solution to the problem and the legal advice which ultimately answers the question.

Matt Abrahams said that “communication structures served as scaffolding for our messages” and our message as legal advisors is critical to be heard, viewed, and considered. Being able to present advice and communications in a clear format allows for it to be more useful to our clients.

Ultimately, legal counsel provide their value through clearly articulating their technical legal advice in simple terms and in a reader-friendly format. We should strive to cut through the noise and get to the point, allowing our business partners to make decisions fully informed of the risks. As James Humes, a speechwriter for five US presidents once said, “The art of communication is the language of leadership.”

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Theo Kapodistrias is a multi-award-winning lawyer, working for the University of Tasmania for almost six years. Kapodistrias is a generalist lawyer advising the University on several varied matters and areas of law, including commercial contracts, intellectual property, real property, privacy, and discrimination matters. He has been recognized in Australia being named the 2020 Young Lawyer of the Year by the Law Society of Tasmania, the Academia, Training and Education Lawyer of the Year at the 2018 Corporate Counsel Awards, the 2017 and 2018 30 Under 30 (Corporate Counsel), and featured in the 2019 Legal 500 Australian Rising Stars Publication. In addition to his substantive legal role, Kapodistrias is a Non-Executive Director and Tasmanian Divisional President of ACC Australia, a Tasmanian Ambassador and Industry Champion with Business Events Tasmania, an ambassador for World Idea Day, and the past co-president of the Southern Young Lawyers Committee of Tasmania.