

5 Ways To Build Trust When Talking With Clients

By **Jody Godoy**

Law360, New York (March 8, 2016, 8:03 PM ET) -- Building trust is key to having successful client relationships. But experts say fostering that kind of rapport takes more than just delivering legal solutions. Emotional intelligence — skills including self-awareness and empathy, which aren't necessarily taught in law school — can help.

Emotional intelligence starts with self-awareness. Robert Riordan, a former lawyer and psychologist who serves lawyers in Manhattan, says that once people start to learn more about who they are and what they value, they have a better starting point for understanding where others are coming from.

"As opposed to being a concrete set of skills, effective relating emanates from someone being genuine and extending that genuineness to someone else," Riordan said.

Here are five ways attorneys can build trust with clients.

Listen to More Than Words

Showing that you empathize with clients helps them trust your judgment. If clients think their lawyers don't have the same levels of stress, anxiety or other emotions accompanying their case, they may not feel secure in their attorneys' decision, says Annette Torres, a professor at the University of Miami School of Law.

"Our ability to understand them and to show empathy to their concerns is essential to ultimately persuading that client to make the decision that is most legally sound," Torres said.

This is especially true with clients who are seeking solutions to thorny problems, but also applies to clients seeking advice to accomplish particular business goals, according to Larry Richard, a former litigator and consultant to law firms at LawyerBrain LLC.

In the latter case, empathy allows a lawyer to grasp a client's driving motivations, whether it's excitement about a new opportunity, fear of competition or the need to get something done quickly.

"Figuring out what the client's real mission is in seeking out your services helps you to respond to that client in a tailored way instead of just blindly giving legal advice based on the concrete question they have," Richard said.

The Medium Is the Message

How you communicate with clients can speak volumes. Emails, phone calls, video chats and in-person meetings all have their advantages, but it's important to choose the right one based on both the situation and the client's communication preferences.

Torres, who practiced employment law for 17 years, asks her clients how they prefer to communicate at the outset of the relationship. While some clients only want to be emailed, others would rather conduct business over the phone.

However, those preferences should be balanced with the goal of that particular communication — if you are delivering bad news, for example, a phone call or a meeting can be more suitable than an email, she says.

Gaby L. Longworth, a director in the biotechnology group at Sterne Kessler Goldstein & Fox PLLC, cautions that email communications lose the emotional context of a phone call or a meeting.

"It can be difficult to gauge a client's reaction to what you are communicating and your 'tone' can come across stronger than intended at times," Longworth said.

She finds it best to communicate in person when possible, because it allows her to pick up on physical cues. Is the client's posture defensive or open? Do eyebrows go up at a particular piece of advice?

Torres notes that these kind of clues are "absolutely essential" at first meetings when attorneys are building ideas of who their clients are and what they need.

Tailor Your Language

The type of language you use with your client will vary depending on who the client is.

Torres recommends choosing words based on what you know about the client. If it's an experienced in-house counsel, you can use some shorthand, whereas other clients may have legal or business training that can help them understand proposed solutions. Other clients may need more background.

Longworth advises attorneys to "speak in plain English" and "avoid overwhelming the client with cumbersome legal jargon."

"Don't knock the client if they don't know the law — educate them," she said.

Adapt Your In-House Communication

Experts agree that cultivating emotional intelligence in interactions not only with clients but within the firm itself will pay dividends in client relationships and beyond.

For one thing, the way attorneys interact with each other in front of a client shapes how the client views the legal team.

"Others see the message that we send," said Rosalie Chamberlain, a former diversity and inclusion manager at Alston & Bird LLP who is now a management consultant to large firms. "For someone to

really feel they can trust you, you have to be walking your talk."

How firm leaders communicate with junior attorneys also sets the tone for how those attorneys communicate with clients. But the benefits go beyond that, Chamberlain says.

"When leaders use these types of skills, not only do those they lead learn from them, but they are motivated and more engaged," she said.

Know Your Client's Reality

To understand a client's needs, you have to understand the client's culture — whether it's a different country, a different part of the U.S. or even the company.

"You are not going to be able to learn every aspect of all cultures, but being aware and thoughtful can really make a big difference," Chamberlain said.

She notes this not only helps to uncover any biases you hold that could affect communication with the client, but allows you to better understand how the client operates.

"It's not just about bias," Chamberlain said. "It's about realizing, 'It's my responsibility to build some knowledge around the culture.'"

Longworth notes that this extends to the corporate world.

Knowing clients' corporate hierarchies and cultures — whether they're cutthroat, formal, friendly or otherwise — lets you "arm them with the information they need," she said.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Edrienne Su.
