

Fulfilling the Public's Trust

Second in a series about the public service values essential to attaining excellent customer service in the Clerk's Office (May 2002).

Effective Communication

Concise, clear, and timely communication of information is the essence of what we do in the Clerk's Office. We receive, record, share, interpret, and safeguard information crucial to the success of the judicial process. A central component of information management is effective communication with all customers, both external and internal. Effective communication is key to smooth office operation—quality and teamwork cannot happen without it.

The dictionary defines communicate as “convey information about. . .to reveal clearly. . .to express oneself in such a way that one is readily and clearly understood.” Communication is imparting ideas and information, which requires not only that a message is given, but also received with its meaning intact. Effective communication involves knowing who needs information and then transmitting it concisely and timely, choosing the best medium (e.g., letter, memo, e-mail, phone, or in person) for the audience and the use of the information, and knowing how to listen well. Fostering open communication throughout the office also enhances an environment where information is shared effectively.

The giver and receiver of information have several responsibilities to ensure successful communication. When you are the giver, keep these things in mind: anticipate the needs of your audience; organize your thoughts in advance; use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation; test your content out on an uninvolved third party you trust (e.g., give a written draft to a friend to review and edit); stick to the important issues and avoid being personal; give criticism constructively and sensitively; meet deadlines and promises; praise in public; and allow the receiver a chance to understand your message and respond without interruption. When you are the receiver of information, you will enhance communication by reading or listening carefully and giving full attention to what is being given to you. Paraphrase back to the sender the message you have received to confirm mutual understanding. Make sure you do not prejudge before getting the entire message, and give your thanks for any help you have received. As the giver should do, stick to issues, rather than personalities—and do not shoot the messenger!

The giver and receiver share responsibilities to make communication effective. Both people need to be direct and honest, yet tactful, to instill trust. A willingness to share information with all who will benefit fosters teamwork. However, “direct” does not mean blunt or cruel. Either as giver or receiver, you should be polite and respectful at all times. Consider the impact your words may have on the other person, and put yourself in the other person's shoes. If misunderstandings or errors do arise, despite your best efforts to the contrary, clarify and correct as soon as possible. Finally, since a large part of any interpersonal communication occurs non-verbally (through body language, eye contact, etc.), make sure your non-verbal messages are the same as what you are actually saying. If you are not communicating in person, on the other hand, be aware that the other person does not have the non-verbal cues as a guide, so make sure your message is clear and the tone is appropriate.

Effective communication in our office depends on each person's making a commitment to, and daily practice of, sharing information concisely, timely, and clearly. If we make this commitment, we will increase the quality of our work and foster better teamwork. We will support the needs of our customers and more effectively meet future challenges. Effective communication, then, is fundamental to our providing excellent customer service and fulfilling the public's trust in us as public servants.