

THE LAWYERS WEEKLY

Shaky voice can stall your career

By Sheldon Gordon

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A few years ago, a senior associate at a Bay Street law firm, suffered a career setback: She was passed over for promotion. The partner who oversaw her work was dismayed that he frequently received phone calls from one of her clients seeking reassurance that she was providing good advice.

She had excellent technical skills and solid experience, but was failing to inspire confidence in her advice, because she spoke to her clients softly and uncertainly. So, the firm paid for her to see a speaking coach, Trevor Currie of Podium Consulting.

Over three sessions, he coached her to make a few small changes in how she communicated over the telephone and in person — and it had a dramatic impact on how she was perceived. The client stopped calling the partner for reassurance; the senior associate made partner the following year.

Says Currie: "Most of the lawyers who come to us do so not from a place of great weakness but because they're now at a stage in their careers when they're in front of clients more frequently. It's important that they speak with clarity and engender confidence in their listeners."

Currie sees three presentation flaws in his clients:

- Providing too much technical detail relative to the expertise of the listeners and to the amount of time available.
- Neglecting to provide examples — preferably from their own practice — that showcase their experience and expertise.
- Relying too much on a script, reading it in a monotone and not making eye contact, which does not readily engender confidence.

Not all lawyers will become stellar communicators, even with coaching, but most can achieve a substantial improvement by making two or three small changes, Currie says.

Poor presentation skills, of course, are only one reason why professionals may fail in their careers. Australian career coach Siimon Reynolds, who has written a self-help book *Why People Fail*, cites other reasons for failure:

- Negative thinking: If you always focus on the negative and undervalue your new ideas and those of colleagues, you are sabotaging your advancement.
- Low productivity: If you are disorganized and lack the discipline to plan and make the time needed for priority tasks, your productivity will be low.
- Fixed mindset: If you feel your capabilities are limited, you won't stretch yourself to outperform.
- Emphasis on IQ over EQ: If you think high IQ is the passport to success, you've underrated emotional intelligence, which is twice as likely as IQ to predict success later in life.

Sheena MacAskill, formerly a lawyer in private practice, has been a career coach to other lawyers since 2007. Many of her clients are first-rate technical lawyers but lack the skill or the desire to do business development. "Private practice is more and more demanding," she says, "and it's tougher than ever to advance to partner because one needs to have a growing and sustainable practice."

Business development isn't taught in law schools or even in law firms, MacAskill says. But once lawyers are in transition — either leaving their firms voluntarily or having been asked to leave — they are forced to start networking. "It's very empowering. Invariably they say: 'Wow, I wish I had done this while I was practising. I'd be much further ahead.'"



[Pavel Losevsky / Dreamstime.com]

Networking must be treated as a necessary part of private practice, not as an optional chore, MacAskill says. "The first thing that I get them to do is make a list of people in their network...just put down 25 names, they can be colleagues, law school friends, opposing counsel. Once the list is made, they soon see that it's valuable. There's always going to be opportunities when you have a conversation with someone."

But she advises young lawyers to incorporate networking into their practice early on. "If you only start doing it when you're in transition and looking for a job, you may look like somebody with their hands out."

Debra Forman is principal of Pinstripe Coaching, and the resident coach for the International Association of Young Lawyers. She tries to get her clients to think of setbacks as part of everyday life rather than as a mark of failure.

"Lawyers are highly skilled, very smart, driven people, but sometimes they beat themselves up over something they should let go. The harder you are on yourself, the more setbacks you have, because you're setting the bar higher."

She finds that many of her clients engage in thinking that causes negative feelings and self-defeating actions. "If you think you're not good enough, you're going to feel inept and act in an unimpressive way. The most common forms of negativity that we feel are as a victim or in conflict."

It might be failing to win a promotion or watching another associate get a coveted assignment that will eat away at the individual "that can be a 'block' that weighs down on you," she says

Similarly, a lawyer may feel ineffective in landing new clients.

"You get work through building relationships, not simply by asking for it," Forman says. For example, if the lawyer is uncomfortable at small talk, she may advise sending the prospective client some articles pertinent to his business and joining industry groups that he is in.

Forman strives to get her clients to shift their thinking and behavior by helping them redefine the situation. "But the new approach has to be authentic," she says. "It has to be consistent with who you really are."

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