

Effective law firm administration Depends upon connecting with others

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One of the key responsibilities of a legal administrator is the need to interact effectively as a leader with lawyers and staff – one-on-one or in groups – in order to get things done.

In addition, legal administrators need to build and maintain networks of people that they can rely on for support in their professional and personal lives.

Personal interaction styles and networking skills were discussed by speaker and author Sarah Michel at the annual retreat of the Mile High Chapter of the Association of Legal Administrators (www.milehighala.org) held Feb. 29 and March 1 at The Historic Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colo. The retreat was attended by 72 members and guests.

Michel works with organizations and associations to create behavioral changes by teaching people how to connect with each other. Her company, Perfecting Connecting (www.perfectingconnecting.com), is located in Colorado Springs, Colo.

The way we influence others

Interactive styles are created by combining the way in which we influence others (by directing or by informing) with the role we tend to play during interactions (initiating or responding) to yield four distinct communication patterns. (The patterns are dealt with in more detail in the next section.)

“It is essential to understand that no single leadership interaction style works for all people in all situations,” said Michel. “Each has positive aspects, but each can also generate negative reactions from those you are trying to persuade.

“The important thing is to be aware of your own personal style as well as the styles of the individuals you are interacting with when you are attempting to influence or achieve a common goal,” said Michel. “It is also important to know that you can consciously modify your style in order to bridge gaps and be a more effective leader.”

Directors focus the way they influence others on the specific task at hand and the achievement of quick results. Their intent is to give structure to the project and to direct

the actions of others. “With words, directors tell, ask, direct and urge their colleagues to action,” said Michel. “With their bodies, they stride forward purposefully. They point.”

On the negative side, directors are so certain that they are right that others might perceive them as bossy. “Directors are often surprised when they meet with resistance,” said Michel. “When working with an ‘informer,’ directors can be frustrated by the lack of a clear position and can grow impatient with a lengthy process.”

Informers focus the way they influence others on the process and motivation of their colleagues. Their intent is to give information, seek input from others and inspire (rather than demand) action. “Informers use words to explain and describe,” said Michel. “They use flowing, open and eliciting body language to encourage participation.”

On the negative side, informers can be perceived by others as indecisive. “Informers are often surprised when no one takes action based on the information they have provided,” said Michel. “When working with a ‘director,’ informers can be offended at being told what to do rather than consulted.”

Michel demonstrated this difference with the example of a senior lawyer who was an ‘informer’ working with three junior lawyers who were ‘directors.’ The senior lawyer gave the juniors a program brochure with the comment that it looked like an excellent event. Later, he was upset when the juniors did not attend. “If he wanted us to go, why didn’t he just say so?” was the response of the juniors. Both parties felt misunderstood.

The role we play

Initiators set the pace and tone of an interaction by focusing on their external world. Their intent is to reach out to and interact with others. “Initiators are often the first to speak,” said Michel. “They interrupt. They are extraverted and gregarious. Non-verbally, they are fast-paced and active.”

On the negative side, initiators can be perceived by others as intrusive. They are often surprised when others do not want to talk or provide feedback. “When working with a responder, initiators can be impatient with the slow pace or with feedback that comes after the initiator thought a decision had already been reached,” said Michel.

Responders set the pace and tone of an interaction by focusing on their internal world. Their intent is to reach inside and reflect before agreeing or disagreeing with an idea or a course of action. They are more solitary and harder to get to know – but their subject-matter expertise can be very deep. “When dealing with responders,” said Michel, “give them some time to think and react. Don’t crowd them.”

On the negative side, responders can be perceived by others as cold or withholding. Responders are often surprised to find out that others think that they are ‘mad’ at them or

unhappy with a proposed course of action. “When working with an initiator, responders can feel pressured by the pace and frustrated by a lack of time to reflect,” said Michel.

Michel illustrated this difference by talking about the ways initiators and responders “recharge their batteries” after a hard day at the office. “An initiator will want to go out with others to a social venue and talk about what happened. Initiators ‘recharge their batteries’ by interacting with other people. A responder will want to spend time alone to ponder what happened. Responders ‘recharge their batteries’ with solitude.”

The way we influence others + the role we play = interactive style

In-Charge leaders are ‘directing’ in the way they influence and ‘initiating’ in the role they play. They like to get things accomplished by quick decisions, mobilizing resources, removal of obstacles and rapid action. “They believe that it is worth it to go ahead and act or decide,” said Michel.

Chart-the-Course leaders are ‘directing’ in the way they influence and ‘responding’ in the role they play. They like to have a course of action to follow and they like to keep themselves, the group and the project on track. “They believe that it is worth it to think ahead to reach the goal,” said Michel.

Get-Things-Going leaders are ‘informing’ in the way they influence and ‘initiating’ in the role they play. They like to persuade and involve others in a group project – and facilitate the process. Their enthusiasm can be contagious. “They believe that it is worth it to involve everyone and get them to want to proceed,” said Michel.

Behind-the-Scene leaders are ‘informing’ in the way they influence and ‘responding’ in role they play. They like to get the best result possible. “They believe in the worth of quietly and calmly integrating and reconciling many inputs – often one at a time – in order to arrive at an informed decision,” said Michel. “This style of leader in particular has to be careful to avoid ‘analysis paralysis.’”

If individuals become polarized along their interactive styles in the course of a project, the inevitable result will be miscommunication and misunderstanding.

“It is easier for those who share at least one element – either the way they influence or the role they play – to get along,” said Michel. “Build on the characteristic that you have in common and work around the characteristic where you differ.”

The most damaging conflicts arise between those with no shared characteristics. “Most commonly, In-Charge and Behind-the-Scenes leaders clash in interactions involving control of the process – individual versus consensus,” said Michel. “Chart-the-Course and Get-Things-Going leaders clash over the pace of the process – long-term strategy versus immediate tactics,” said Michel.

By understanding your own interactive style, law firm administrators can maximize the positive while reining-in behaviors that might be perceived by others as negative. By understanding the interactive styles of others, they can appreciate their strengths while understanding their behaviors as unique styles – not personal attacks.

Connecting the dots

“Understanding your interaction style also plays an important role when you ‘connect the dots’ in order to build networks of people who can provide you with the information you need to be successful in your professional and personal lives,” said Michel. Michel discussed the formation of social networks in a separate retreat program.

“These networks constitute your ‘social capital’ or ‘net(work) worth,’” said Michel. “They are just as valuable as your financial capital and your financial net-worth.” Michel defined ‘connecting the dots’ as a six-stage process.

Stage one is *Self-Assessment* and includes an honest assessment of your own interaction style, your own natural talents and skills, and how you can act as a resource for others. “Before you go out in public, spend some time developing a short statement of your unique talents and skills that is concise, catchy and clear,” said Michel.

Stage two is *Do Your Homework* and includes advance preparation for any connection opportunity – like a meeting or an event. “These can be formal events like ALA programs or informal events like your child’s soccer game,” said Michel. “In this day and age, they can even be online social networks like LinkedIn. What are your intentions for this opportunity? Whom do you want to meet? What might you have in common?”

Stage three is *The Initial Meeting* and includes your first conversation with a possible connection. “Anyone within three feet of you is a potential network contact,” said Michel. “Ask open-ended questions to determine how you might be a resource for the other person and how the other person might be a resource for you.

“Productive relationships take work,” said Michel, “so decide at this stage if this person is a useful contact and if you are willing to work on ‘connecting the dots’ in a way that honors the style of both parties.”

Stage four is *Connecting the Dots* and includes the hard work of examining your existing network to find someone who might be able to help this new acquaintance. Is there a way in which these parties can help each other? Are their interactive styles compatible?

Stage five is *Follow-up* and includes doing what you promised to do in your conversation – sending information to or making the introduction between members of your network. “If you are able to help someone, graciously accept their thanks,” said Michel. “If someone helps you, express your gratitude. Circle back eventually to let the person know how the connection worked out for you.”

Stage six is *Committing to Building the Relationship* and includes ongoing maintenance of your network. “Get your network out of your head and out of your Rolodex and into a CRM system – where it is much easier to maintain and work with,” said Michel. “These systems will keep track of your contacts as well as your interactions (including reminders) – allowing you to ‘connect the dots’ in as little as one hour a week.”

Personal interaction styles and networking skills can help legal administrators and others change their behaviors in order to connect with each other – in project teams and networking situations.