



High-Stakes Communication



By Deborah Johnson

Imagine that in every conversation, every meeting, every presentation, you move people from resistance to commitment. Imagine that you feel confident to speak up and speak out with your unique perspective, insights, and knowledge. Imagine that you routinely influence judges, jurors, opposing counsel, senior partners, peers, and clients.

It's what many of us yearn to do. We have dreams and desires. We want to be the best we can be, play all-out, and use our gifts to maximum benefit. You may have created a career in law to achieve your dream of justice for those accused or give voice to those who are wronged or help families and children or create strong businesses or protect the environment.

Despite the depth of our desire, we can get stuck sometimes. Our heart-felt desires can outstrip our abilities. We may falter in tough negotiations, stall in front of a large group, not know how to give full voice to our thoughts, or not know what to do when others are disrespectful or dismissive.

### **Honor the Gap**

This gap between desire and your current abilities can feel like the Grand Canyon. Mine did. In my own journey from EMMY Award-winning television writer/producer to trial consultant, I had a huge gap. I had a dream of putting all my years of experience and expertise to work to help people in the judicial system. I naively thought that the influence I had in the TV world would easily transfer over. It didn't. In the beginning, I was woefully inadequate at translating my unique background into terms that resonated with attorneys.

Every time I failed to help an attorney understand what I could do for their problem witness, it was a loss. There were people who lost their business or lost custody or lost their home or lost their savings or lost their freedom. I wasn't there to help them be clear and concise and confident in deposition or trial. It was painful to know that I could help but didn't get the chance. Where are you frustrated?

## **Build the Skill**

In order to make the difference I wanted, I was determined to overcome this gap and ignite my influence. The good news is influence is a skill you can build. It's not about being louder or stronger or more aggressive. Influence is about being a compelling force, inspiring change, having the capacity to affect others' actions. True influence comes from what I like to call being "organic." That is, who are you at your core? What are your gifts? What is your superpower? You can ignite your influence by discovering and tapping into your unique assets.

## **Tame the Flame**

Without direction or finesse, your raw desire and unique talents are not going to get you what you want. You must learn how to masterfully apply them. I had to create a new foundation of influence in this new environment. First, I had to get clear about my value. The talents I took for granted in TV were rare commodities in the legal world: attracting and persuading an audience in less than 30 seconds, leveraging the subtleties of body language, using your voice to attract, using the 20 words that build rapport, understanding the intricacies of how our brains respond to communication, and how to shape a "performance" for maximum impact on the audience.

You have your own rare skills and talents that don't have anything to do with the law but can profoundly enhance your success. You just have to uncover and utilize them.

Second, I got curious and open about what wasn't working. Where was I not connecting with attorneys? You'd think that a communication expert would nail this. But honestly, it took a while to understand the world you operate in, the challenges, and the language you speak. I studied and listened. It gave me the opportunity to do what I set out to do – give every person a voice so they could be heard.

## **CONCLUSION**

You can turn up the flame on your ability to influence others. You can make a bigger difference – in your life and the lives of the people you interact with. Whatever that initial desire was that got you into the legal world, you can have that. You don't have to imagine moving people from resistance to commitment. You can do it, every day and in every conversation.

No two people are the same. No two people are influential in the same way. Developing your own ability to be a compelling force takes time. It takes a commitment to do the work. But I can assure you that the reward is waiting for you.

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