How Much Communication is Too Much?
By Beverly Flaxington
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Beverly Flaxington is a practice management consultant. She answers questions from advisors facing human resource issues. To submit yours, email us here.

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Dear Bev,

How much communication is too much? We meet with clients once per quarter and were surprised when one told us they didn’t need to see us so often. I think we need to stay in front of them.

Mike M., Ohio

Dear Mike,

I once had an advisory firm as a client where they regularly met with their clients every quarter. When we interviewed the advisor’s clients for some positioning and marketing work we were doing, several people told us that once a quarter was too much! The advisor thought it was a perk he was offering, but the clients viewed it as negative.

This advisor put together a sheet with check boxes offering clients to meet as often as they liked – once, twice, three or four times per year. This way the advisor actually had fewer meetings and clients felt well served.

The lesson? Meet on the client’s schedule, not yours. If they say it is too much then it is too much! But turn this into an opportunity to show them you are interested in serving them in a way that works best for them.

Perhaps find some other avenues for communication if you do fewer than four meetings. Have a check-in call, meet for lunch or something less formal or invite them to join a client advisory board. There are many other ways to get those touch points that clients feel are preferable.
Dear Bev,

One of my partners calls me rude. I can’t sit still in meetings and I hate to listen to people drone on and on about nothing. My partner has coached me to change my approach. But I don’t think it is me that needs to change. Why can’t other people understand that it isn’t a reflection on them but rather it’s about me and my style?

Spence B., NYC

Dear Spence,

In my book about understanding others, I identified the number-one secret about why communication styles conflict: “it’s all about me.” It is about you and your style. And it is about your partner and his or her style, too. Differences in behavioral and communication styles are at the root of so many of our difficulties in the workplace (and in our home life, too!) If I am a fast-moving, constant motion person and you are slower and more thoughtful in approach then you are “stuck” and you find me off-putting and anxious.

We “read” the behavior of the other person instead of listening to what they are saying. The problem is that we often read it negatively. We interpret the behavior in a judgmental fashion. Your partner’s use of the word “rude” is an example. You likely don’t mean to be “rude” if you are a strong leader, but your partner has a filter that says “this type of behavior = rude.”

We can’t change who we are at the base level. We all have preferred approaches and if left alone, we will behave in the way that is most comfortable to us. The problem is those other people! They filter our behavior through their lens (because it is all about me for all of us) and then we make a decision about whether it is good or bad.

We need to adapt our style and approach. As one of the leaders of the firm you have a couple of choices. You and your partner could agree to work together if your styles are different and complementary. You could divvy up staff and interact with those people each of you has the best rapport with and understands. Or, preferably, you could observe your staff and learn more about each of their behavioral styles and approaches. You could modify the way you communicate in interactions with those different from you.

If you want to send the message to your staff that you truly care about them, modify your approach and communicate in a way that works for them.
Beverly Flaxington co-founded The Collaborative, a consulting firm devoted to business building for the financial services industry in 1995; in 2008 she co-founded Advisors Trusted Advisor to offer dedicated practice management resources to advisors, planners and wealth managers. She is currently an adjunct professor at Suffolk University teaching undergraduate students Leadership & Social Responsibility. Beverly is a Certified Professional Behavioral Analyst (CPBA) and Certified Professional Values Analyst (CPVA).

She has spent over 25 years in the investment industry and has been featured in Selling Power Magazine and quoted in hundreds of media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, MSNBC.com, Investment News and Solutions Magazine for the FPA. She speaks frequently at investment industry conferences and is a speaker for the CFA Institute.

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