

Balancing Listening and Speaking to Become Authentic, Vulnerable, and Effective Leaders

By NDIDI N. MOSES

“The ear of the leader must ring with the voices of the people.”

— Woodrow Wilson

The theme for this bar year: “Balance for a Better Legal Profession,” sought to remind us all that to achieve success, we need to achieve balance in everything we do. It was a blessing and a pure pleasure for me to be able to discuss this topic with you over the last bar year through the President’s Message column in *CT Lawyer*. Each article was as much of a reminder to me, as it was to you, that we all need to balance: customs with innovation, work with play, tribalism with community, networking to advance our own goals and being unofficial ambassadors for others, individual freedom with collective responsibility, and as this article will discuss—listening and speaking. In retrospect, this article should have been the first article I wrote for the President’s Message. While it is the most important balancing act of them all, it is also the one I have worked this entire bar year to master, to make sure the Connecticut Bar Association (CBA) was effectively serving the needs our members and the community.

My inspiration to write this article on listening came quite unexpectedly at a meeting of a professional association I was attending on behalf of the CBA. At the meeting, which was filled with bar leaders from all over the country, one of the most controversial resolutions on the agenda

Ndidi N. Moses is the 96th president of the CBA. Her focus for this bar year is balance for a better legal profession. As an active member of the association, she serves on the Board of Governors, House of Delegates, and Pro Bono Committee.



before the governing body passed with almost no opposition, and no public debate. The resolution passed with no opposition, even though, when the meeting commenced, I noticed the eager aspects of participants, who anxiously waited for what they thought would be a heated and controversial discussion. I realized I underestimated the attention the resolution had received when I noticed the swarm of reporters hovering around the meeting *like honey bees*. Yet, the controversial and impassioned debate everyone was expecting did not occur, and a resolution that started with resistance by a vocal minority—passed quietly. No one but those intimately close to the discussions were aware of *why* the moons and stars re-aligned, causing the tides to turn, and ushering in the ultimate success of the resolution. As an observer, I can only imagine the shift occurred when the drafters of the resolution made a conscious decision to carefully listen more than they passionately spoke. Specifically, instead of trying to convince people to listen to their pitch in favor of the resolution, the brave crusaders for the resolution began to listen to the concerns raised by those in opposition, and spoke only to address specific concerns, miscon-

ceptions, and devise solutions. In the end, the resolution passed with little amendment, and those originally opposed to it vocally supporting it.

The cynics among us may wonder whether the drafters’ decision to listen, silently, was driven by their masterful implementation of one of *The 48 Laws of Power* by Robert Greene (1998). After all, in the book, Law #4 does encourage us to “say less than necessary...[because] [p]owerful people impress and intimidate by saying less.” Yet, other more aspirational books call for the same tactics, but for better reasons. In Stephen Covey’s, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, he reminds readers to “seek first to understand, then to be understood.” In his book, Covey notes that many of us fail to really listen to what people are saying, fail to empathize, and in doing so we fail to communicate effectively. Our failure to communicate not only leads to miscommunication, but lost opportunities to deescalate situations. In fact, one of my favorite authors, Dale Carnegie, discussed this premise in his book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. In the book, Carnegie encourages us to be better listeners, noting that active listening is a

way of proving to people that they are sincerely appreciated and respected members of a team or community. For this reason, in his book, Carnegie's rules for success focus on people paying attention to the needs and desires of others, and learning to communicate with them by first comprehending the language they speak and seeing the world from their perspective.

After leaving the meeting of the professional association, one question remained in my mind as the controversial resolution passed with no opposition: how did the drafters get their opponents to let down their guard and express themselves so a dialog could begin? The answer came to me at a meeting of bar presidents, when a guest speaker reminded bar leaders of the importance of being authentic and vulnerable in leadership. The discussion was so powerful, I ordered a copy of two of the books discussed: *The Power of Authentic Leadership: Activating the 13 Keys to Achieving Prosperity Through Authenticity*, by Jeff Davis and Brené Brown's, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. The premise is simple—other people will not trust you enough to open themselves up to you if you are not being true to yourself by being *authentic* in your leadership style. If you are being authentic, you are also being vulnerable, and if you are being vulnerable, it means your guard—*your shield, sword, and armor*—are down and there is nothing to fear. I began to appreciate what the drafters of the resolution were doing, and what I overlooked during their presentation. They were doing more than actively listening—they were having an authentic, vulnerable, and honest conversation with their opposition, without their sword, shield, or armor. They truly wanted to connect and understand the other side's point of view, and it showed in their approach and presentation. Their authenticity revealed a vulnerability that made them relatable and no longer threatening, thereby opening the channels for communication.

We can, at least secretly, admit that law school's Socratic method taught us to hide our vulnerabilities. For many of us,

this translated to a reluctance to acknowledge our limitations and need for additional instruction. Many of us trudge through life trying to find answers by ourselves, before admitting our unfamiliarity with issues and seeking the counsel of others. In doing so, we protect our egos, but we miss opportunities to foster our growth and development in other ways, because we pass over opportunities to connect on a deeper level with others. The masks we wear to avoid looking uninformed prevent us from being authentic and relatable to others. We weigh down our shoulders with the unrealistic idea that we should know the answer to every

Connecticut Bar Association commenced this year to allow the organization to obtain feedback from our members and the legal community.

Recognizing that surveys typically receive low participation rates, we planned to pair them with listening sessions and focus groups. The onset of the 2020 pandemic forced us to delay these efforts until the crisis was over, and also gave me time to reflect on this advanced approach to listen to the needs of our members. I began to realize that these efforts, geared at opening the lines of communication, may be received more positively if an authentic

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question, and are blinded by the mistaken belief that by asking others to educate us we become inferior.

In refusing to opening up and listening to others, we miss valuable opportunities to learn from our mistakes, maximize our potential, and maybe even serve as an inspiration for others who are trying to navigate out of the illusion of perfection when faced with its grim reality. We also miss opportunities to discover the wealth of knowledge and wisdom of those around us, bursting at the seams with insightful ideas, hidden talents, and untapped potential.

The application of these concepts to everything in life is endless, but since this is my final article as president of the CBA, I will focus on how it impacted my thoughts on the numerous initiatives the

conversation proceeded them. To be clear, I am not suggesting the legal community and the bar association are at odds on the importance of communicating with each other. Rather, I began to ponder if, perhaps, the tools the CBA had planned on using to open the lines of communication needed a different, more *authentic*, introduction and approach. Otherwise, requests to fill out surveys and requests to participate in listening sessions and focus groups, which are intended to open up lines of communication, could be perceived as competing with the limited time, resources, and energy of our members, and others in the legal community. In this way, our goal of encouraging discourse could be compromised at the outset.

To offset this, I decided to write this final article. If you take anything away from this article, let it be that the CBA wants

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President's Message

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to listen to your concerns and grievances, and to make you successful in your pursuits. I am not sure if the methods we have been utilizing are the most effective way to gather feedback from our members and allow for us to listen to the concerns of the legal community. I do know the CBA is eager to listen to your suggestions on how we can improve our efforts. We need to know what we are doing *right* but, more importantly, we need to know what we are doing *wrong*, and what you need from us. We want to listen to what you want and what you have to say, not just because our mission requires it, but also because we genuinely care about ensuring justice and preserving the rule of law as well as ensuring our members and affiliate bar associations are successful in their endeavors. To accomplish these goals, we need your support, your voice,

your thoughts, your ideas, and your grievances. Our armor is off, our guard is down, and the CBA is ready to listen. ■

Thank you for allowing me the chance to serve this year as your president. Throughout this bar year, I have had the pleasure of speaking with and getting to know so many of you and your families. Thank you for contacting me to discuss issues, inspiring me to write articles on topics and launch initiatives. I enjoyed working, learning, and growing with all of you. The support I received from you, the amazing staff at the CBA, my fellow officers, past presidents, the leaders of various sections and committees, other bar associations, and professional organizations cannot be understated. For this, I will be eternally grateful.

Pro Bono

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pro bono services, and supporting legal aid in these difficult and challenging times. It has truly been a pleasure to serve as chair of the Pro Bono Committee and working with and being inspired by our Committee members and attorney volunteers striving to narrow the access to justice gap. I look forward to continuing the important work of the Pro Bono Committee under Cecil's leadership. Stay well! ■

NOTES

1. Frequently Asked Questions on the State of Connecticut's actions related to COVID-19 at p. 4. (<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Coronavirus/COVID-19-FAQs.pdf?la=en>)
2. Medical Associations, CT Department of Consumer Protection (<https://portal.ct.gov/DCP/Common-Elements/Consumer-Facts-and-Contacts/Medical-Associations>)
3. Hartford Agrees To Pay Out \$2.75 Million To Residents Improperly Displaced From Condemned Buildings, Matthew Ormseth, March 22, 2018. (<https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-news-hartford-housing-settlement-20180321-story.html>)
4. <https://ct.freelegalanswers.org>
5. ctbar.org/SmallBusinessClinic
6. <https://www.lawyersforgoodgovernment.org/covid-smallbusiness>
7. ctbar.org/ProjectFeedCT
8. [Foodshare.org](https://www.foodshare.org)
9. [CTFoodBank.org](https://www.ctfoodbank.org)
10. <https://www.ctbar.org/home/coronavirus-response/resources/for-the-public>

PDD

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Attorney ordered by agreement to submit to three credit hours of continuing legal education in IOLTA account management and to cooperate with monthly audits by the Statewide Grievance Committee for a period of six months for violation of Rule 1.3, 1.15(e) and 8.4(4) of the Rules of Professional Conduct by failing to render a proper accounting regarding a tax lien when requested by the complainant and by failing to respond to the grievance complaint in violation of Practice Book § 2-32(a)(1). *Kaufman v. Walter A. Shalvoy, Jr.*, #18-0760 (10 pages).

Reprimand ordered by agreement for violation of Rule 8.1(2) of the Rules of Professional Conduct and Practice Book § 2-32(a)(1). *Hernandez v. Robert Louis Fiedler*, #19-0089 (8 pages).

Attorney ordered by agreement to submit to three credit hours of continuing legal education in law office management for violations of Rules 1.2(a), 1.2(c), 1.4(a)(2), 1.4(a)(3), 1.5(c), and 1.16(d) of the Rules of Professional Conduct. *Lowe v. Joseph E. Fournier*, #19-0143 (10 pages).

Attorney ordered by agreement to submit to three credit hours of continuing legal education in legal ethics and three credit hours in residential real property for violation of Rules 1.5(b), 1.7 and 1.16(d) of the Rules of Professional Conduct by representing the buyer and seller of the same real property in the same transaction without written consent of the complainant and by failing to provide the complainant or her counsel with a copy of her file within a reasonable time upon request. *Honeysette v. Dale H. King*, #19-0145 (9 pages).

Reprimand ordered by agreement for violation of Rule 8.4 of the Rules of Professional Conduct by failing to make payment under a promissory note, and attorney was ordered to make restitution of \$22,500 on or before thirty days after acceptance of agreement. *Brown v. Lawrence J. Greenberg*, #19-0230 (8 pages). ■

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