

EVERYONE'S A LAWYER

Peter Woodhouse is an employment law expert and heads up the Business Sector at national law firm Stone King – but he asks, ‘aren’t we all lawyers?’ In each issue of TBE Peter reflects on a legal skill that most of us use every day. This time he explains how to make every word count.



Peter Woodhouse, partner and head of business at Stone King

Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, tell them again! I expect many of us of a certain age were taught this as a basic principle of essay writing. Even these days, despite the multitude of resources available, it can be helpful to think about what we knew and practised as small children of the art of persuasion.

A child may nag and whine with its parent. But put that same child into an unfamiliar environment, say with a less well-known aunt or uncle, and the behaviour will change. That’s because the child knows that the audience has changed and therefore knows the same methods of persuasion are unlikely to work.

Put that grown child in the workplace and those instinctive skills can be forgotten. Employees can forget their bosses are people, and bosses can forget that their staff are individuals. Thus, if you want to persuade someone, work out first what is likely to trigger that individual. Are they going to respond to greater financial reward, greater engagement, better work life balance, improvements to their own team, improvements

to the whole business, better environmental outcomes, social or ethical benefits, or something else?

In order to find this out you will most likely need to listen! Listen to what they give away in conversations, formal or otherwise. Most people don’t keep this sort of thing a secret. So if your boss is keen to increase turnover from sales of widgets in her division, explain how your pay rise will link to the achievement of that – not how much happier your pay rise will make you.

Look out for when your listener is going to be most receptive. Grabbing someone at home time with a request for a favour may get agreement from someone who just wants to get out the door, but may not be the most propitious moment for someone who likes to take time over a decision.

Finally, be aware what language you use. There is a lot written about neuro linguistic programming and I would encourage those interested in the art of persuasion to spend time learning some of the techniques. One particular technique involves using the same word formations and

imagery of the person you seek to persuade. So you might choose to say I am really “in tune” with you on this and “I hear that”; or you could say “I see that” and “I can really picture what you want to achieve”. For another listener you might use words like “I feel hard done by” or “that doesn’t sit right with me”.

But whatever you do, don’t forget where our persuasion skills were first learned. As a child we kept it simple. As a trainee barrister one of my advocacy instructors played that back to me and instructed me to KISS: Keep It Simple Stupid!

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