

Working with Challenging Clients - Top Tips

Challenging clients can be very difficult to work with. At PD Consulting we exist to equip lawyers to manage challenging dynamics through setting clear boundaries and expectations and helping them to communicate and listen effectively to their clients.

What is a challenging client?

- A client who breaks the boundaries of the working relationship
- A client who becomes emotionally dysregulated
- A client who struggles to reflect and see other people's points of view

Clients become challenging due to...

- The heightened emotions of being in a stressful and unfamiliar situation
- Incorrect assumptions about the nature of the lawyer-client relationship
- Previous negative experiences in lawyer-client relationships
- Lawyers providing inconsistent boundaries leading to shifting expectations
- Lawyers not being adequately attuned to their communications
- Additional mental health issues

What is your 'bedside manner' as a lawyer?

Like doctors have a 'bedside manner', which effects how patients receive their treatment, lawyers also need to be mindful of their communication styles when engaging with clients. What is your 'bedside manner' with a client? Do you communicate care and professionalism through non verbal cues?

Good 'Bedside Manner'

1. Adopt an upright and attentive posture
2. Be mindful of negative mannerisms (crossed arms, fidgeting, slouching)
3. Provide clients with enough eye contact
4. Minimize noises and/or distractions in the room
5. Turn off your phone or put in on silent
6. Do not constantly look at your watch

Do you have good or bad listening habits?

When we don't listen to our clients their emotions often manifest in challenging attitudes and behaviour, as they want to be heard. Challenging clients will respond better when we listen actively and provide them with feedback that we have heard their communication. Listening does not mean that we agree.

Bad Listening

1. Jumping to conclusions that we understand what someone is trying to communicate
2. Refusing to process a person's opinion because we think it is wrong
3. Switching off mid dialogue and then zoning back in
4. Providing solutions to client's problems before fully hearing their situation
5. Not reflecting back what has been said

Good Listening

1. Display open and attentive body language
2. Listen to and punctuate what is being said with 'umms', 'ahhs' and head nods
3. Find natural moments to mirror back aspects of what the client is saying (with parrot-like repetition)
4. Summarize what has been said by using the client's own words and understanding of the situation