

Engaging & Listening to the Voice of Your Firm's Future Leaders

By [LawVision](#) on April 21, 2015

I recently celebrated a huge milestone for my family: My daughter's first birthday. In a year that flew by at the speed of light I experienced the thrill of many highlights including watching her learn to roll over, sit up, crawl, and teetering efforts to walk. But perhaps none of her developments have created more joy than watching Grace learn to find her voice and communicate.

My daughter loves to talk. Granted, I understand less than one percent of what she says. Other than "Momma," "Daddy," "Doggie" and "Go," I'm relegated to nodding and asking questions about a seemingly intricate and complex language that involves a combination of hand gestures, facial expressions and varying degrees of tone and volume. Yet I still engage.

Engaging creates a meaningful bond- both for my daughter and me. I might not understand what she's saying, but I listen nonetheless. Unfortunately, it's the engaging – *and listening* – that often seems to be absent between associates and partners in some law firms.

As we progress beyond the stale "Generational differences 101" conversations into substantive dialogues about understanding motivations and leveraging contrasting perspectives, some law firms seem to embrace the opportunity to engage with Next Gen lawyers whereas others fail to open the lines of communication. Why is this happening?

Perhaps it's because we're afraid we don't understand the language? Similar to my daughter's indecipherable vocabulary, some law firm leaders fear that they won't relate to junior lawyers' perspectives on the crippling effects of law school debt, their desire for more immediate feedback to improve "real-time" performance, their limited understanding of what it takes to become partner at the firm, or their desire to even be a partner at the firm. The rules have changed. The vocabulary has changed. It has the potential to make even the most seasoned law firm leader feel uncomfortable.

Engaging can have an incredibly positive affect on productivity, commitment and morale. Failing to do so can unnecessarily widen the gap between senior partners and the future leaders of your firm at a time when succession planning is incredibly crucial. Small steps can have a big impact. Scheduling casual lunches, informal coffee meetings or town hall dialogues are easy ways to begin listening to the voice of your associates. I often hear associates tell me that partners are perceived to be "too busy" to have off-the-cuff conversations about non-work related topics. Setting aside even five minutes a day can go a long way to understanding the voice of associates at your firm.

At a more formalized level, using outside consultants to facilitate leadership programming, focus groups, case studies or working groups is an excellent tool to help decipher the voice of your Next Gen leaders. Now if only I had the same tools to decode my daughter's secret language... My advantage is that I have the luxury of time and patience...unlike some aging partnerships.