

# 5 Hard Phrases Lawyers Should Master

By **Karen Ross** (July 25, 2019, 10:46 AM EDT)

On a recent business trip, I engaged in a common activity for lawyers during a hotel stay: multitasking. While watching "The Today Show," I responded to emails, sipped a mocha and prepared for a meeting. Then, an interview of Kelly Corrigan won my undivided attention. Corrigan highlighted some of the lessons from her New York Times bestseller, "Tell Me More: Stories About the 12 Hardest Things I'm Learning to Say."<sup>[1]</sup>



Karen Ross

The stories focus on simple words or phrases that are difficult to say and, as Corrigan explains, are more effective than the convoluted and unhelpful words often used in their place. It was clear from the interview that her commentary applied to one's personal life, but I wondered if the lessons might also apply to becoming a successful and happy lawyer. Proper word choice is critical in the practice of law, but it is also important in the conversations lawyers have with others.

Later, as I read Corrigan's book, several sayings stood out. While it is beneficial to read the entire book to gain the full breadth of her insights, I have identified five phrases that we, as lawyers, should learn to say, or say more often, to improve our professional lives.

## 1. Tell Me More

Learning to say "tell me more" will improve a lawyer's professional life with clients, adversaries, courts and coworkers. Lawyers tend to like to talk, but we need to focus on listening to and learning all of the available information — not just what we think is important. Learning to say "tell me more," "go on" and "is there anything else you would like to tell me?" during client pitches, social interactions, interviews, strategy sessions, depositions, etc., allows a lawyer to identify all the evidence and the actual problem or issue.

A successful lawyer understands the whole picture, and, to do that, you need to ask for more information and then listen, listen more and listen even more before making a pitch, recommending a plan or presenting a position or argument. Saying "Tell me more" will help lawyers listen and learn.

## 2. I Don't Know

Lawyers by nature, education and/or experience often feel they need to respond immediately to an inquiry or be the first to speak during a strategy session, but that is not always good or even necessary. Learning to say "I don't know" is important to providing good client service and maintaining productive relationships. The current environment of expecting or even demanding immediate answers and the resulting impatience associated with the slightest delay does not often result in good lawyering.

Lawyers, therefore, need to learn that it is OK to say "I don't know" as long as it is followed up with something along the lines of "but I will look into it and report back." This allows the lawyer to investigate the facts and conduct any necessary research to provide an accurate answer. Admitting that you do not know the answer or what to recommend is a strength,

not a weakness. It is best to be honest; even if saying "I don't know" is scary or risky, it will result in good representation. It is better to be right than fast.

### **3. No**

Saying "no" to a potential client, current client or colleague can be intimidating; however, it can be necessary when the request is not possible or is not good legal practice. Lawyers need to be confident and strong when saying "no;" they must also be ready and willing to be challenged to explain why "no" is the right answer. Simply saying and explaining "no" is not enough, though: Lawyers need to recommend an alternative. Clients come to us for advice, so lawyers should have opinions and recommendations. Even when the advice is not what a client wants to hear, we must provide it in a way that accommodates the client's position and is legally appropriate.

Learning to say "no" is also important to maintain a manageable workload in your firm or place of business. It is always best to explain the "no" to your colleagues and provide an alternative plan so the necessary work is completed. Being overloaded results in poor work product and/or an unhappy personal life, so be prepared to stand up for yourself. Caution, though: You must be sure you actually are overloaded (i.e., busier than the person asking you for assistance).

### **4. I Was Wrong**

In the case of mistakes, errors or misjudgment, lawyers sometimes ignore the issue, which only makes the situation worse (just as it does in your personal life). Learning to say "I was wrong" paves a path for lawyers to remedy the issue. The key to saying "I was wrong" in a professional environment is either admitting it after you have fixed the issue (if that is possible and appropriate) or as soon as you have a plan or recommendation to fix it. Just as you should do in personal relationships, lawyers should keep excuses out of the conversation with clients.

The need for lawyers to learn to say "I was wrong" also applies to coworkers. Mistreating others, snapping at people and exhibiting displaced anger are all too common in the practice of law. But just because these traits are common does not make them acceptable, so learn to say "I was wrong," and your professional life will benefit.

### **5. Good Enough**

Lawyers often compare themselves to other lawyers, such as those with big clients, someone who closed a deal or a litigator who won an unwinnable trial. As lawyers, though, we need to realize that we are good enough. Being "good enough" does not mean that you stop trying or growing. It means that you stop comparing yourself to others and focus instead on being good enough to succeed where you are right now and improve. Doubt, frustration, complaining and resentment do not lead to success.

Accepting that you are "good enough" is required to survive and thrive as a lawyer. Using the mantra "good enough" can also help combat the high-stress and high-pressure careers we have chosen.[2]

It is equally important to employ "good enough" when working with others. Micromanaging is not efficient, fails to develop younger attorneys and weakens internal relationships. Just because a colleague completed a project or other task differently from the way you would have done it does not mean that it is not good work product. Rather than focusing on how

you would have completed the project when reviewing a colleague's work, consider whether the final product completes the task and provides good work product. One can provide constructive feedback and address mistakes without taking over the project and redoing it.

Being a good lawyer requires us to recognize that not all lawyers do things the same way, and that is okay. In fact, it provides an environment where lawyers and staff can work together and learn from one another to provide better client service.

### **Just One More Thing[3]**

"I need help" is an empowering admission that lawyers should learn to say, or say more often, in the professional context. Saying "I need help" ensures that you are putting client needs first and focusing on meeting them in an efficient manner. It also alerts your supervisors/management to staffing issues of which they may not have been aware. Like saying "no," adding "I need help" to your vocabulary will facilitate a more manageable workload.

Change is challenging but often necessary to grow and improve one's life. Using phrases that show that lawyers are human results in a better work environment. Employing Corrigan's sayings will result in a win for our profession.

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*Karen Ross is counsel at Tucker Ellis LLP.*

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[1] Kelly Corrigan, "Tell Me More: Stories about the 12 Hardest Things I'm Learning to Say," Random House, 2018.

[2] See, Krill, Patrick R. JD, LL.M.; Johnson, Ryan MA; Albert, Linda MSSW, The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys, Vol. 10, Issue 1, Journal of Addiction Medicine Jan./Feb. 2016.

[3] A lawyer can also learn a few things from Detective Columbo, but that is a discussion for another time.