

MINNESOTAN: A LANGUAGE FOR CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN FACULTY AND DEAN

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IT is not surprising that *How to Talk Minnesotan*,¹ a book written by Prairie Home Companion writer Howard Mohr, is very funny. It combines Minnesota language lessons with stories, ads and vignettes of the types that have made the long-running radio show so popular. The book also contains the framework for a communication system which I believe can be particularly helpful for law school deans and law faculty.²

As will become clear, the “Minnesotan” parodied in the book is a language of apparently low emotional content and indirect communication. It is the indirect nature of these communications that causes me to recommend them, especially for situations when parties are more likely to become defensive or resentful or to take offense. The faculty-administration relationship is a delicate one and some types of decanal communication styles can strain it. Although we prepare our students for an adversarial system, one in which there are appropriate times for confrontation, most messages can be delivered more effectively and received more easily without confrontation. This is especially true in continuing relationships in which the parties need to deal with each other for the foreseeable future.³

“Minnesotan” works particularly well in cases where constructive criticism or evaluative feedback is involved. Although the language might appear ill suited for positive feedback, it can be effectively adapted with some translation and supplementation.

1 *Breaking the Ice*

Minnesotan is not direct. The speaker eases into a topic with various verbal icebreakers in an effort to be polite. Phrases such as “you know” or “so then” often precede a statement.

Two people approach the reference desk at the public library. Which one is the Minnesotan? A. “I want a book on mountain goats.” B. “If you’re not too busy,

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1. HOWARD MOHR, *HOW TO TALK MINNESOTAN* (Penguin Books 1987) [hereinafter *MINNESOTAN*]. As a native Minnesotan, I have to admit that the stereotypes portrayed in the book bear some resemblance to reality. My wife, who is not from Minnesota, says there is a lot of resemblance.

2. I express here my admiration for the innovative law professors who invented the “review essay,” a means by which a previously unpublishable article can be placed in a leading journal under the guise of a book review. I also express my admiration for the work of Professor William Richman who developed this innovative series of articles by deans.

3. As a labor arbitrator and mediator, I have observed union and management professionals engage in substantial disagreements while, at the same time, observing boundaries that made it possible for employees, unions and employers to go back to work the next morning.

ma'am, I was sort of wondering if you could maybe help me find a book about mountain goats then?"⁴

Although humorous, this example does communicate a level of respect for the listener and her time.⁵

2. *The Role of Questions*

"So then" is an icebreaker used to allow one to introduce a suggestion in the form of a question. It works well to introduce otherwise awkward topics as in these "Minnesotan" modifications.

Them: "When are you leaving?"

Us: "So when do you think you might start making your move toward leaving then?"

Them: "Why are you eating candy?"

Us: "So does that one-pounder bag of M&Ms you got there in your hand mean that's about it on the diet then?"⁶

This model can easily be adapted for awkward but necessary law school topics.

Faculty to Dean:

So, do you think you'll be staying on as Dean for more than a few months, then?

So then, do you think we'll be seeing pay raises this year?

Dean to Faculty:

So, did these evaluations convince you to change anything about your teaching, then?

Questions have important advantages over direct statements in enhancing communication within the law school community because they are less threatening in sensitive situations. Whether you are dealing with a vulnerable person from a position of power or approaching a person in authority who might be defensive, questions allow you to suggest without directly confronting the listener. For example, a staff member might ask a supervisor "do you think there's a chance some student could misunderstand this letter and get the wrong idea about _____?" A dean could say to a faculty member having trouble with teaching, "So, what are some things you could do to improve this situation?" Although challenging, the question helps the listener focus on the future rather than uselessly dwelling on the past.

Other variants would include, "So, what can we do to improve your effectiveness in the classroom?" or "What can we do to help you finally complete that article you've been working on for five years?" Note that these questions ask what "we" can do to improve the situation. This allows the person to feel that he or she has not

4. MINNESOTAN, *supra* note 1, at 104-05.

5. Questions such as "Is this a convenient time to talk?" send similar messages.

6. MINNESOTAN, *supra* note 1, at 126.

lost all control, conveys a cooperative willingness to help and can ease the other person from defensiveness to a problem solving mode.

Questions also play an important role in keeping lines of communication open and moving the dialogue forward. Questions that begin with "Are you saying that ..?" or, "Does this mean that you ...?" can be used to show you respect the relationship well enough to pay attention as well as to insure understanding. This pays dividends on many levels.

3. *Making Suggestions and Providing Constructive Criticism*

Another common Minnesota phrase of indirection is *a guy could* and its variations, including *if a guy* and *a lotta guys*. Here's a Minnesotan who's been asked about how to repair a leaking toilet:

_____ "Well, I think if a guy took off that float valve with a Vise Grips, he could maybe get at the gasket then."

See how different that is from:

_____ "Take off the float valve, dummy!" ...

_____ *A lotta guys* is often used to give an opinion when it was not asked for but is maybe needed anyway.

_____ "A lotta guys wouldn't use a welder so close to a gas tank like that."⁷

In the above examples, one person wants to provide another with advice. Use of "if a guy" or "a lotta guys" makes this less apparent.⁸ It is a concept that can be used to great effect by faculty and by deans.

⁷ MINNESOTAN, *supra* note 1, at 105. With only a little imagination, this could be the model for a law school contest suitable for post-faculty meeting socializing with entries like:

"A lotta students who missed class wouldn't greet their professor with 'Did we do anything important today?'"

"A lotta deans wouldn't take every Friday off if they wanted to start enforcing the office hours policy." and

"A lotta professors wouldn't start every class with 'Good morning, boys and girls.'"

The game could even be played at national deans' meetings with entries such as "A lotta deans wouldn't brag loudly about entering class LSATs when they are recruiting 2.5 GPA transfer students to limit admissions."

⁸ The author's use of the term "guy" is intentional. He reports that "Minnesota women are not as indirect as Minnesota men." MINNESOTAN, *supra* note 1, at 106.

a. *From Faculty Members to Deans*

Deans are not perfect. They are also temporary. Despite these limitations, they are trusted with many important decisions and need feedback and suggestions. Although it might seem that deans would always prefer faculty members who are passive and full of praise for the dean's sense of direction, this is not the case. The most valuable faculty members are those who provide ideas, well researched proposals and constructive feedback. Even good ideas can be made better and bad ideas must be abandoned.

The problem, of course, is finding a way to communicate that will not cause a wall of defensiveness to impair the message's effectiveness. Given the multiple constituencies served and frequent 60-70 hour work weeks in a modern dean's life, even the most open can sometimes be less receptive. The "a lotta guys" or "a lotta schools" strategy can be helpful because it refers to an external standard⁹ and may seem less confrontational. It can be more easily processed and received and opens the door to further communication.

b. *Feedback and Constructive Suggestions from Deans to Faculty*

There are many opportunities for deans to provide feedback and times when it is imperative. Annual salary reviews provide opportunities. Pre-promotion and pre-tenure meetings are occasions when direct communication is absolutely necessary. Because some well-intentioned communications can be resented or found presumptuous,¹⁰ however, less formal occasions provide opportunities for less direct means of communication. "If a guy" "a guy could" and "a lotta guys" provide ways for dean to experiment with non-directive direction.¹¹

"A professor with two articles like this could do really well mailing the next one to top journals."

"A lotta professors have used something like this to get a book contract."

"If a person just moved these parts of the conclusion to the introduction, the article might really come together."

"A lotta faculty find it helpful to provide the syllabus early in the year."

9. Whether that standard is "a lotta guys" or, more realistically, a detailed chart showing practices at other law schools.

10. In one case I know about, a dean who liked to award faculty members "grades" each year for teaching, publishing and service invited each to come in to hear the evaluation. Many never did. Some believed they knew their levels of accomplishment; others wondered whether the dean's past record gave him standing to judge in all these areas. As a dean, I am indebted to my now adult daughter, Katie, for an important lesson. At the age of two, she informed me, "You're not the boss of me." I suspect her reaction is not unique and may indicate a unique affinity for a role as a faculty member at some time in her life.

11. Often, indirect communication is successful and the next step, more direct communication, is unnecessary.

4. *Positive Feedback*

A WORD ABOUT EMOTIONAL OUTBURSTS

___ “Oh, great, just wonderful, terrific, I love it!!!”

Get that excited about something in Minnesota and you might as well paste a bumper sticker on your forehead that says I’M NOT FROM AROUND HERE ...

It’s okay to have good feelings but there’s no sense running down the street telling people about it at the top of your voice ...

Minnesotans prefer to express their positive feelings through the use of negatives, because it naturally levels things out ...

If you just got married or bought a late-model pickup under book price with low mileage and hardly any rust, or it’s dawn on opening day of the duck season, a Minnesotan would say ___ “I wouldn’t want you to think I’m not happy.” That’s a strong statement here.¹²

In a world in which some faculty may be used to deans who spend significant amounts of time providing effusive praise, speaking Minnesotan is admittedly an impairment.¹³ Since “nice job” is about as effusive as my face to face vocabulary gets,¹⁴ I look for other ways to extend praise. Introductions, for example, are a good outlet. When introducing a program, I can tell the audience about the faculty coordinator. When introducing a faculty speaker to a bar, alumni or student group,

12. MINNESOTAN, *supra* note 1, at 6.

13. Greetings are subtly crafted as well. In a discussion of how to greet the driver of an oncoming vehicle, the author states:

The ordinary garden-variety wave here is the finger wave. Your hand is gripping the steering wheel, you meet another vehicle, and you raise the index finger. You don’t leave it up, you just flash

Two-to-four finger waves are commonly used between fast-moving vehicles, but the nicely executed single-finger wave is a thing of beauty and a joy forever

MINNESOTAN, *supra* note 1, at 185.

14. Although I am comfortable evaluating and discussing objective criteria to determine the degree to which a faculty member has met or exceeded his or her University responsibilities for pay, promotion or tenure purposes, I could never be comfortable *judging* a faculty member. In addition, Minnesotan speakers are burdened by years of practicing the “angle rule.”

THE ANGLE RULE

Two standing Minnesotans never face each other during conversation. The angle made by the two intersecting lines running parallel to the chests of the participants should never be less than 45 degrees, 90 degrees is the average. 135 degrees is common, and 180 degrees is within reason.

Two Minnesotans in a living room for conversation will both sit on the sofa, one at each end, facing forward, with only an occasional side glance.

MINNESOTAN, *supra* note 1, at 180. Parents who have their best conversations with their children in the car are unknowing beneficiaries and practitioners of the angle rule.

I can mention the person's accomplishments and dedication. I believe, too, in creating annual awards on which students and alumni can vote to honor particularly deserving faculty

Indications that you have taken a person and his or her work seriously are another way to convey your respect. This can be demonstrated in the depth of knowledge shown in an introduction or by taking the trouble to have a thoughtful foundation for a positive opinion. I think that the statement, "I liked your book, particularly the way Chapter Two added a comparative law perspective" is much more effective than "Great book." You also can show respect by asking a person's advice.

5. *Conclusion*

Whether a school has a successful year and whether a workplace is productive frequently turns on big issues such as vision and dedication. Often, however, misunderstandings or insensitive communication styles can impede progress or cause productive people to go elsewhere. I believe that the core principle of Minnesotan, respecting others, can help relationships prosper and make for a more effective law school. I thank the very patient and dedicated group of gifted teachers and scholars with whom I work for helping me reach this conclusion.¹⁵

15. I wouldn't want them to think I wasn't more or less basically happy, then. See text accompanying note 12.