

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ATTORNEY-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP

Both the IACP research and Austin surveys of collaborative participants reveal that the biggest factor impacting a client's satisfaction with the divorce outcome is the quality of their relationship with their lawyer.

Tips for a successful attorney-client relationship:

1. Be authentic.

True to one's own personality, spirit or character. Genuine; real; not false or copied; representing one's true nature or belief. Said another way: "Don't be something you are not."

Offer the collaborative process only if you can genuinely recommend it to clients.

2. Build trust.

Tell the truth (in the kindest way possible). Be present. Be transparent. Do what you say you will do. Understand their perspective, validate their perspective, demonstrate that what they say matters to you (and therefore the relationship matters to you). And explain to the client all their options for proceeding with the divorce, not just collaborative. Do not "sell" the clients anything.

3. Be patient.

Most clients are fearful and anxious; they anticipate loss and not gain. Use the client's fear and anxiety to begin the conversation about the changes about to occur in their lives. It takes time for clients to feel less fearful and less anxious; do not rush them through those feelings; the clients will push back and resist.

4. Be competent.

Know the substantive law. Attend family law conferences and stay current on the law.

Know the collaborative process. Get collaboratively trained. Attend collaborative conferences, advanced trainings, and practice group meetings. Ask for feedback. You can always be better.

5. Commit.

Let your actions demonstrate your commitment to your profession. Get involved in your local, state and national bar associations. Become board certified in family law.

Demonstrate your commitment to the collaborative divorce process. Get credentialed (if offered by your state), get involved in practice groups, statewide groups, and national/international groups.

In Austin, clients say that “experience” and “being a good fit” were the most important factors when choosing a collaborative lawyer. Advertising and social media are not a strong basis for referrals in Austin.

What are you doing to demonstrate your experience and commitment to the legal profession and to the collaborative process?

6. Improve your “people” skills.

Lawyers generally are not great listeners because we are always listening for legal issues and relevant facts. There is plenty of time for that. Try not to do all the talking; let the client tell their story; listen without judgement.

7. Be aware of blind spots.

Ask lots of questions. Do not assume that you see what they see. Do not assume that they hear what you intend to say. Questions allow us to discover what is behind our clients’ fears and anxieties. Questions demonstrate a desire to understand.

8. Be responsive.

See number 3. Fearful, anxious people want to know you are there for them—you have their back. Always return phone calls and emails the same day you receive them even if you are just acknowledging receipt of the call or email and letting them know when you will get back to them. When a client says “no need to respond” they do not mean this. Always respond.

9. Be kind.

Say “thank you” at the end of the divorce case. They have entrusted you with their lives and their family’s lives. That is an amazing thing.

10. Provide resources.

Develop a good list of resources: estate planning lawyers, CPA’s, health insurance advisors, therapists, child specialists, massage therapists, bookkeepers, mortgage brokers. Anticipate what a client or their family may need.