

# The Future Is Human: Building Powerful Legal Communication Skills for the Age of AI

The profession is beginning to train oratory back into relevance. Presence, connection, and advocacy—long treated as “soft”—are once again becoming the hard edge of legal practice.

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Clients hire lawyers for their knowledge and judgment. They expect experience, and need clear-eyed, accurate guidance about options, opportunities and costs.

But what distinguishes the lawyers clients *return to* is more than intellect and experience. It's presence. It's connection. It's whether the lawyer shows up as a real partner—listening deeply, speaking clearly, and demonstrating care for what's at stake. In other words, it's trust on a human level.

I saw this firsthand as an in-house lawyer and executive at major corporations. Outside counsel who understood our business and our people didn't just provide boilerplate memos; they built relationships. They weren't only responsive—they asked questions and were invested. They showed up, understood our business realities, and stood by our side.

## The AI Shift Changes What Lawyers Must Deliver

As AI makes high-quality written legal work easy to produce, the value that human representation provides has changed. Clients now arrive with draft agreements or even AI-assembled complaints in hand. For reasonably sophisticated clients, gone are the days when they hire outside counsel to draft routine business contracts or terms of service.

So what will clients still pay lawyers to do?

The answer:

- **Human Judgment:** To assess ambiguity when the law or facts are unclear, and propose a wise path forward.
- **Relationships:** To use their knowledge, standing, and communication skills to navigate unfamiliar waters through dialogue.
- **Persuasion:** To distill the situation, problem-solve, and convince judges, juries, regulators, boards, business partners, rivals, and communities of the best solution to a problem.

Even the most brilliant lawyers can't think their way through these tasks. They require us to use our full range of human presence and skill: the ability to walk into a room, breathe, listen, use language, and connect in a way that earns trust and persuades.

## Are Lawyers Up to the Task?

Unfortunately, our legal education and attorney development systems under-prepare lawyers for this reality. A few moot court exercises, some Socratic questioning—sometimes from professors untrained in communication craft—are not enough. Experiential education is part of the solution, but even clinical simulations and on-the-job learning often miss the essential training foundation: *how to be fully present with another human being under pressure.*

Moreover, to the extent lawyers are trained in human connection and speech at all, it's usually aimed at talking to other lawyers. Arguing both sides of an appellate issue in moot court. Presenting case briefs in Con Law.

But these skip the most important step: how to actually connect with others in conversation. How to be present. How to manage nerves. How to use your voice in a space. How to walk into a room when everyone is watching. How to breathe, listen, and really connect on a physical, emotional, and intellectual level.

## The Research Supports Embodied Communication Training

Studies show that audiences don't just listen to the substance of an argument—they evaluate delivery, tone, and presence. Factors that shape trust, decisions and careers.

### **In the courtroom and negotiations:**

- Jurors' perceptions of counsel's confidence, clarity, and demeanor shape credibility and persuasiveness—and, in a large field study, those evaluations significantly predicted which side won (Wood et al., 2011; see also Frank and Morera, 2012; Diamond et al., 1996)
- Negotiation effectiveness is enhanced by empathy, adaptability, mindfulness, and presence (Schneider, 2002; Brach, 2008; Pérez-Yus et al., 2020), and vocal confidence significantly influences persuasion outcomes (Guyer et al., 2021)

### **In leadership and business:**

- Executive presence—including clarity of delivery—shapes perceptions of authority and trust (Hewlett, 2024; Dagley & Gaskin, 2014)
- Language and vocal tone in corporate earnings calls can affect stock price movements (Abrahams, 2016)
- Patterns of communication—energy, face-to-face interaction, and balanced participation—are the most important predictors of team effectiveness, outweighing intelligence, personality, and skill (Pentland, 2012)

The Committee on Legal Education and Admissions Reform (CLEAR) confirmed this need in its 2025 report: while new attorneys excel in legal research and technology, they struggle with

“critical competencies such as client communication, legal writing specific to practice tasks, negotiations, and oral advocacy.”

## **The Skills Great Lawyers Need in the Age of AI**

Great lawyers don't just think clearly. They speak clearly. They connect, inspire trust, hold the room, and are heard.

The skills lawyers need to support this aren't abstract concepts. They're practical, embodied activities:

- Understanding how breath, posture, and voice affect communication
- Being present in the room and adapting communication to different situations
- Managing performance anxiety and staying grounded when everything is on the line
- Genuinely connecting with others by listening deeply and responding authentically

As the research shows, and AI makes even clearer, these traditional “soft skills” are now the key differentiators in expert advocacy. They’re within us, but become difficult to access when they aren’t regularly used. For many lawyers, they need to be revitalized and practiced more consistently.

## **The Good News**

The good news is, these skills can be taught. But they require more than anecdotal tips from lawyers or analytical frameworks. What's needed is serious, craft-based training in presence, voice, breath, movement, and speech—performance skills honed for high-stakes environments.

A small but mighty field of seasoned expert communication skills coaches is emerging to fill this gap. Not just successful trial and deal lawyers who want to pass along their personal tricks and tips, or communications consultants offering surface-level frameworks. But experienced performance coaches who have studied the craft of delivery and presence, walked the walk themselves, and learned how to teach it to other professionals. These experts can go into a mock trial or workshop with lawyers at any level, assess voice, presence, movement, and speech issues quickly and accurately, and give actionable physical adjustments in real-time.

## **Return to Lawyering’s Rhetorical Roots**

For centuries, courtroom advocacy was recognized first and foremost as a rhetorical art: persuasion through voice, presence, and embodied human connection. Classical rhetoric placed delivery—hypokrisis (Greek) or actio (Latin)—at the center of persuasion, and for several centuries the Inns of Court trained lawyers through live moots and oral performance.

In recent decades, the profession drifted away from this tradition. As trials declined and written motions became the norm, lawyering moved to high rise office buildings and behind keyboards.

Many lawyers became most comfortable in their heads, honing analysis, and drafting semantically elegant briefs and contracts, while oral communication skills atrophied.

Now AI is changing the equation again. If technology can draft contracts, emails, and court filings, then the skills clients will still pay for are those machines cannot replicate: human judgment, relational trust, and persuasive presence. Early evidence and commentary already point to this shift, with embodied skills emerging as the key differentiator in an AI-saturated world.

In other words: the profession is beginning to train oratory back into relevance. Presence, connection, and advocacy—long treated as “soft”—are once again becoming the hard edge of legal practice.

It’s time to reclaim that tradition deliberately. Lawyers need to be taught, coached, and practiced in the skills that matter most in this new era: how to speak with clarity, listen with depth, and earn trust in the room. AI will handle the documents. The future lawyer will embody the argument.

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