

Calibrating client personalities on the witness stand

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The courtroom is a theater of personalities and characters. Seasoned attorneys with years of training from moot court in law school to week-long seminars in trial preparation, orchestrate their persuasive legal arguments, but those arguments are often dependent on the presentation of their clients. From award winning actors to novice comedians, they acknowledge “it’s all in the delivery.”

Witnesses are unfamiliar with court proceedings and may have anxiety or misconceptions about testifying. They are not trained actors, rather they are people

with different personalities and communication styles that attorneys must understand and navigate when preparing witnesses to testify in court. How can we achieve the most compelling testimony? Not through radical personality transplants, but assisting witnesses to present authentically calibrated versions of themselves. Let's explore strategies attorneys can employ to help clients modulate their natural tendencies to create credible, persuasive testimony.

Understanding the personality spectrum

The introvert-extrovert continuum

Personality exists on a spectrum rather than in binary categories. Introversion and extroversion is such a continuum. Introverts typically draw energy from solitude and internal reflection and think deliberately to determine the best response for them, while extroverts gain energy from social interaction and external stimulation and use more generally accepted and socially engaging to help determine their best responses. While most people fall somewhere between these poles, each witness will have tendencies that lean one way or the other, depending on context.

In testimony preparation, attorneys must first recognize where their clients naturally fall on this I/E continuum. This assessment isn't about labeling clients. It's about understanding their default communication styles, comfort zones, and stress responses. How might an introvert respond to courtroom pressure? Often by becoming increasingly withdrawn. And an extrovert? They might become overly talkative or performative. An important note is that both the introvert and the extrovert become over-stimulated in new environments.

Personality under pressure

The courtroom environment—with its formal procedures, public scrutiny, and adversarial nature—creates unique pressures that often amplify natural personality tendencies. Under stress, introverts may retreat further inward, becoming excessively terse or appearing evasive. Extroverts might compensate by becoming overly verbose, interrupting, or attempting to charm their way through difficult questions.

Attorneys must prepare clients for this personality amplification effect and develop techniques to help them maintain an appropriate demeanor in spite of the pressure. Understanding that personality traits often intensify under stress is the first step toward effective modulation and make no mistake, for the introvert the witness chair can be torturous, for the extrovert it's a performance stage.

Working with introverted clients

Challenges of introverted testimony

What obstacles do introverted witnesses typically face on the stand?

- Appearing cold, detached, anxious or uncaring due to limited facial expressions or emotional display
- Providing overly concise answers that seem evasive or incomplete
- Difficulty making and maintaining eye contact with jurors or the questioning attorney
- Showing physical discomfort through nervous gestures or rigid posture
- Struggling to assert themselves during aggressive cross-examination

These tendencies can undermine credibility and likability—two factors that significantly influence how testimony is received.

Strategies for dialing up introverted personalities

Emphasize connection without performance

How can we help introverted clients understand that effective testimony isn't about performing but connecting? Authentic communication requires presence rather than theatrics. Let's consider techniques like:

- The "one person" approach: Suggest they focus on speaking to one sympathetic-looking juror or the attorney, rather than addressing the entire courtroom.
- Three-second eye contact rule: Maintain eye contact for three seconds before briefly looking away and reconnecting with another listener - reassure them that while those three seconds feel like an eternity to them, it's not that long (and remind them to breathe!).
- "Bookend" responses: Begin and end answers by looking at the questioner, which creates a sense of direct engagement.

Expand response framework

Introverted clients often provide minimalist answers that can appear uncooperative. What response expansion techniques might help them?

- The "3-part answer" format: (1) Direct answer to the question, (2) Brief explanation or context, (3) Concrete example or supporting detail
- "Yes/No Plus" approach: For closed questions, answer with "Yes/No" followed by a brief elaboration even when not specifically requested
- Verbal signposting: Using phrases like "There are three reasons for that..." to create structure that encourages fuller responses

- Explain potential objections by the other attorney. Let them know what they might be, how to recover and return to the topic - and that you are there to help them with follow-up questions.

Harness introverted strengths

Rather than trying to transform introverts into extroverts, how can we leverage their natural strengths?

- Thoughtfulness: Brief pauses before answering can convey careful consideration rather than uncertainty
- Precision: Teaching them to use specific, accurate language rather than generalizations
- Depth over breadth: Encouraging deeper exploration of fewer points rather than superficial coverage of many

Physical presence training

How does body language impact testimony perception?

- Practice "open posture" techniques: shoulders back, hands visible, feet planted firmly
- Breathing exercises to manage anxiety and project a calmer voice
- Subtle movement techniques to avoid appearing frozen or rigid
- Voice modulation practice to avoid monotone delivery

Working with extroverted clients

Challenges of extroverted testimony

What potential pitfalls do extrovert witnesses face?

- Appearing over-eager, insincere, or performative
- Providing excessively detailed or tangential answers
- Interrupting questions or anticipating questions incorrectly
- Over-gesturing or exhibiting distracting physical animation
- Attempting to control the examination rather than responding appropriately

These tendencies can damage credibility and create the impression of evasiveness or dishonesty.

Strategies for calibrating extroverted personalities

Channel enthusiasm productively

How can we help extroverted clients direct their natural energy in productive ways?

- "Question-answer symmetry" principle: The answer should be proportional to the question's scope.
- The "airport runway" approach: Allow sufficient space before takeoff and landing in responses.
- Energy conservation techniques: Identify key moments where animation enhances testimony versus where restraint is a better fit.

Develop listening discipline

Extroverts often struggle with the passive role of witness. How can we develop their listening skills?

- Complete question rule: Never begin answering until the question is fully stated

- Three-second pause technique: Brief mental count before responding to ensure comprehension
- Active listening indicators: Subtle nodding or appropriate facial expressions that show engagement without interruption

Refine verbal precision

What methods help extroverted clients tighten their communication?

- "Headline first" approach: State the core answer before providing details
- "Rule of three" for examples or supporting points: Limit illustrations to three key points
- Verbal editing techniques: Recognize and eliminate filler phrases, unnecessary qualifiers, and tangential information

Calibrate physical expression

How can we channel natural expressiveness appropriately?

- "Anchor points" for hands: Establish default resting positions for hands when not gesturing
- Practiced pauses: Incorporate deliberate moments of stillness between animated segments
- "Dial" concept: Imagine a control dial for expressiveness that can be adjusted for different types of questions

Preparation techniques for all personality types

Video review sessions

What might be the most effective tool for personality calibration? Video-recorded practice testimony. How should review sessions be structured?

- Begin with self-assessment: Ask clients what they notice about their own presentation before offering feedback.
- Use comparison examples: Show clips of both effective and ineffective testimony styles and demonstrate the effective responses, clients learn through modeling good witness behaviors and responses.
- Implement targeted adjustments: Focus on one or two specific behaviors per session rather than overwhelming with multiple critiques.
- Track improvement: Document progress on specific behaviors across multiple practice sessions.

Courtroom familiarization

How can reducing environmental anxiety help all personality types present more authentically?

- Multiple visits to the actual courtroom when possible
- Detailed descriptions of procedures and physical layouts
- Role-specific rehearsals with mock jurors providing feedback
- Stress inoculation through practice under increasingly challenging conditions

Cognitive reframing techniques

How can we help clients reconceptualize testimony in ways that leverage their natural tendencies?

- For introverts: Frame testimony as "teaching" rather than "performing."

- For extroverts: Approach testimony as "focused conversation" rather than "entertainment."
- For all witnesses: Emphasize authenticity over perfection.

Ethical considerations in personality calibration

Authenticity vs. coaching

How can we navigate the line between appropriate preparation and inappropriate coaching? Ethical testimony preparation should:

- Focus on removing barriers to authentic communication rather than creating artificial personas
- Enhance natural communication styles rather than manufacturing performances
- Address behaviors and communication patterns, not factual content or substantive testimony
- Recognize that juries are remarkably perceptive to inauthentic presentation

Maintaining truthfulness

What is the primary ethical obligation in testimony preparation? Ensuring that personality calibration never compromises truthfulness:

- Emphasize that how something is said never trumps what is said
- Incorporate ethical reminders throughout preparation sessions
- Practice transitions between different emotional states that might arise during testimony
- Establish "red line" boundaries that should never be crossed regardless of examination pressure

Conclusion

Effective testimony preparation recognizes that witnesses need not transform their personalities but rather calibrate them appropriately for the courtroom environment. By helping introverted clients dial up their engagement and assisting extroverted clients in channeling their energy productively, attorneys can ensure that witnesses present their authentic selves in the most effective manner possible.

The most persuasive testimony occurs when witnesses appear comfortable in their own skin while adapting to the unique demands of the courtroom. Attorneys who skillfully address personality factors in testimony preparation provide their clients with a significant advantage in the pursuit of justice.

The way a witness testifies has a direct effect on the court's and jury's perception of a person's veracity. The more confident and straightforward a witness is, the more truthful and credible that witness will come across. The goal is never personality transformation but rather personality optimization—helping each witness find the version of themselves that can most effectively communicate truth to the finders of fact. In doing so, attorneys fulfill one of their most important roles: ensuring that the human element of justice is served alongside its legal components.

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