



THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITHIN COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS

We often hear the importance of communication within a personal relationship. Merriam-Webster defines “communication” as the act or process of using words, sounds, signs or behavior to express or exchange information or to express thoughts, feelings, etc., to another person. We also often hear about how clear and open communication is essential for any healthy relationship. Good communication in a relationship brings people together and avoids conflict. Studies show that effective communication in the workplace increases productivity. Studies also show that successful leaders are outstanding communicators—they clearly define their vision and empower others to join them in achieving their goals. When people communicate well with one another, things are good and feel positive. When communication breaks down, people feel upset, frustrated, mad, sad, and/or distance between the people grows.

We often remind members of the board of directors for a community association that they are running a business, “so run it like a business.” As noted above, running a successful business means communicating effectively. Within a community association, effective communication by the members of the board and management will help set the tone within the community. It will also help to establish credibility for the management of the association. Hence, it is important to get it right during the everyday operation of the community and in the midst of some challenging times. So, what can managers and board members do to ensure proper communication?

On a daily basis, the following should be practiced:

1. Identify who will be the regular messenger. Professionally managed communities engage a management company to assist in the day-to-day operations of managing the community. Communicating with the owners is an important aspect of these day-to-day operations. To avoid the “he said/she said” argument, all communities should limit who will engage in the day-to-day communications with owners. Either the community association manager or one board member should be designated as the point of contact for the owners.
2. Empower the messenger to know it is OK to say “I am not the best messenger” to send this message. There are times when the person selected to be the messenger is no longer the best person to communicate in certain situations. This typically happens when the messenger is personally attacked or is starting to feel frustrated, ineffective, or too personally entangled. For this reason, it is important for the messenger to know when this happens, he/she can speak up without consequence, and the board will designate a new messenger.
3. Identify to whom the messenger should communicate. The members of the community association are the owners of the units. Tenants are not members of the community. They are not entitled to the same information or communication that an owner is entitled to receive. For this reason, communities should empower their designated messengers to only communicate with owners. Except for a maintenance emergency, tenants should be told to direct their issues and questions to their landlord.
4. Address how communication, beyond needed repairs, will be addressed between board meetings. It is for the board of directors to decide how owners’ questions and concerns between board meetings will be addressed. The law requires open board meetings for a reason, as this ensures all owners are given an opportunity to hear about what is going on within the community. Responding to email questions and concerns in between meetings should be done in a way that does not run counter to this purpose. Accordingly, the board should determine how and when it will address member questions and concerns in a way that ensures that important information is communicated to all owners.
5. Address how board members will learn about the owner communication management is receiving between board meetings. While it is best for professionally managed associations to allow its managing agent to address owner questions and concerns between board meetings, it is also important for the board members to be aware of the issues and concerns being raised by owners. For this reason, a process should be established to ensure that this information is conveyed to the board.
6. Remember, written communication lasts a long time, and written words have no voice or facial cues. This means that when sending an email, assume everyone will see it. We attorneys often say, “assume it will be an exhibit to a complaint.” Only put in writing that which you are comfortable with everyone seeing. Also, while attorneys favor a paper trail, the reader will read the message based on his/her mood or the tone he/she decides is appropriate. Use your words wisely.

There are also times when the board of directors must convey a message to the community for a specific reason. Some examples include when the association undertakes a capital project; needs to adopt a special assessment; changes managing agents; receives an owner challenge on a special assessment, for example; or is named in a lawsuit, etc. While the above tips are also helpful when conveying important specific messages, the following are some additional tips to be practiced:

1. Prepare and think about the message that must be given. Allowing sufficient time to prepare helps to ensure that the message being sent is the one that the board of directors wants to convey. Thought should be given as to what the primary purpose of the communication is. In addition, thought should be given as to what the members must clearly understand after

- receiving this communication. Considering the input from several people can help ensure that the appropriate message is conveyed to the membership.
2. Read the room and know your listeners. Once the board decides what the message is that it must send to the community, it must also stop and think about what the community wants and needs to hear. Consider the questions that will be raised and the concerns that will arise when the owners receive the communication. Include in the communication information that provides clear answers and addresses reasonable concerns.
 3. Be honest and fact-check. All of the information given to the community must be accurate. It is better to give owners “bad facts” than dishonest facts. Honesty creates trust, and trust is the key to an effective relationship.
 4. Select the right messenger. An important message must be delivered by the right messenger. This person typically is the one who can most effectively convey the message—not only with the words used, but also who will be best received by the community. This does not have to be the president of the board. It does not even have to be an officer. It just needs to be the person to whom the community will listen.
 5. Know it is likely not a “one-and-done” message. With big projects, the board should regularly be sending “messages” to the community. After all, with each phase, there likely is additional information to share with the owners. With the initial message, the owners should be told that updates will be provided, at what intervals, and in what manner. Then, with each message to be conveyed, the above steps should be followed and considered. Again, the communication should be clear, concise, and include the information that our owners want and need to know.

Finally, regardless of when and how you are communicating, you must listen! Listening is a key component of communication. When people listen, it then helps with their communication. Remember, listening includes hearing the words and tone and observing the facial cues.

While the above tips are often doable, there are times when board members and managers will fall off track—AND THAT IS OK. When that happens, it is important early on to get back on track. So, when you see your team is failing to follow these steps, take a deep breath, regroup, refocus, and perhaps even seek the help of an outsider.



REMINDER: YOUR ASSOCIATION MUST ADOPT A COLLECTION POLICY IF YOU WANT TO COLLECT ASSESSMENTS IN 2027

Last month's newsletter summarized the recent amendments to both the Illinois Condominium Property Act and the Illinois Common Interest Community Association Act. Community associations bound by either act are required to adopt collection policies before taking legal action to collect assessments. These collection policies must include certain information, such as the date on which assessments are due and are considered delinquent, the amount of any late fee, any returned check fees, the circumstances under which payment plans will be accepted, how payments are applied, when accounts will be referred to an attorney, etc. In addition, a copy of the collection policy must be provided as part of the sale disclosures under applicable law.

If you have not already contacted our office about what your community must do to come into compliance with the law, please do so. January 1, 2027 will be here before you know it!

Chuck Keough (cmk@kmlegal.com), Dawn Moody (dlm@kmlegal.com), and
Gabby Comstock (grc@kmlegal.com)

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Naperville
630-369-2700

Chicago
312-899-9989

www.kmlegal.com
info@kmlegal.com

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Keough & Moody, P.C.,
114 East Van Buren, Naperville, IL 60540





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