



*The Women's Bar Association
of the State of New York*

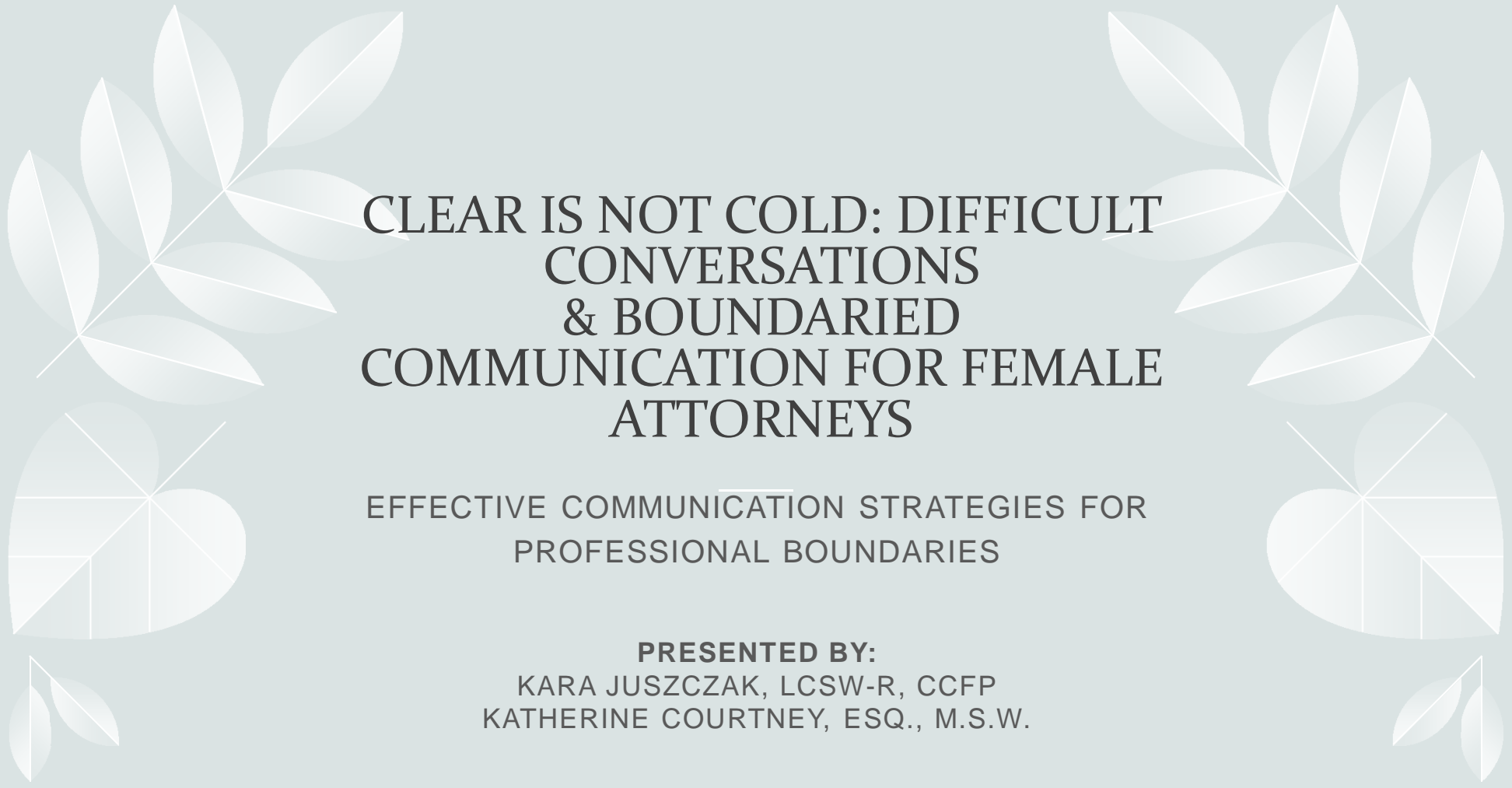
presents

*Convention 2026
Continuing Legal Education Series*

**Clear is Not Cold:
Difficult Conversations & Boundaried
Communications for Female Attorneys**

May 29, 2026
2:15 pm - 3:15 pm

Presenters: Katherine Courtney, Esq.
Kara Juszczak, LCSWR, CCFP



**CLEAR IS NOT COLD: DIFFICULT
CONVERSATIONS
& BOUNDARIED
COMMUNICATION FOR FEMALE
ATTORNEYS**

**EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR
PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES**

PRESENTED BY:

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KATHERINE COURTNEY, ESQ., M.S.W.**

CLEAR IS NOT COLD: SESSION PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

Clarity vs. Misinterpretation

Clear communication by female attorneys is often mistaken for coldness due to gendered expectations in legal settings.

Systemic Cultural Dynamics

Legal culture enforces hierarchical and adversarial norms that disproportionately impact women's communication styles.

Balancing Empathy and Professionalism

The session promotes maintaining empathy without self-erasure while asserting clear and firm communication.

Skill-Building Focus

Encourages attorneys to develop communication skills that emphasize clarity and confidence without apology.

SESSION OVERVIEW AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Understanding Communication Challenges

Explore why difficult conversations feel uniquely challenging for female attorneys and how feedback shapes communication over time.

Gender Norms and Authority

Examine how gender norms influence perceptions of professionalism and the double bind faced by women in authority roles.

Impact of Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

Highlight trauma bonding and compassion fatigue as factors influencing communication and boundary-setting in legal settings.

Practical Communication Tools

Provide usable scripts and strategies for addressing labels, setting limits, and managing difficult conversations effectively.

EFFECTIVE
COMMUNICATION IS NOT
ABOUT BEING “NICE” — IT’S
ABOUT BEING CLEAR,
BOUNDARIED, AND
RESPECTFUL.



GENDERED COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS



RESPONDING TO LABELS LIKE “AGGRESSIVE” OR “COLD”

Hypothetical #1: “You’re Being Aggressive”

You firmly state your position in a meeting. Later, a colleague tells you that your tone came across as aggressive.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Is this feedback or a reaction?
- What is the professional risk of over-correcting?
- Common double binds for female attorneys:
 - Assertive vs. “aggressive”
 - Direct vs. “cold”
 - Collaborative vs. “weak”
- How these dynamics show up in:
 - Courtrooms
 - Client interactions
 - Supervisory and collegial relationships
- Impact on credibility, advancement, and professional identity

MODEL LANGUAGE

- “I’m being direct because the issue requires clarity.”
- “My tone reflects the seriousness of the matter.”
- “I’m comfortable with how I communicated.”

Key Takeaway: Communication challenges are structural—not personal failings. And unfortunately, women are often expected to self-edit more than male colleagues.

TRAUMA BONDING IN LEGAL WORK



UNDERSTANDING
TRAUMA
BONDING IN
PROFESSIONAL
SETTINGS

Hypothetical #2: “We’re All Just Doing Our Best”

Your office is overwhelmed. You routinely stay late, absorb extra work, and avoid raising concerns because everyone is stressed and “in it together.”

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Definition of trauma bonding in professional settings
- Why trauma bonding is common in:
 - Legal services
 - High-conflict litigation
 - Crisis-driven workplaces
- How trauma bonding affects communication:
 - Silence to preserve harmony
 - Over-functioning
 - Difficulty setting boundaries
- Distinguishing trauma bonding from healthy professional connection

MODEL LANGUAGE

“I’m committed to the work, but this isn’t sustainable.”

“We need to revisit how responsibilities are being divided.”

“Shared stress doesn’t mean unlimited availability.”

Key Reframe:

Shared stress does not require shared suffering.

COMPASSION FATIGUE AND COMMUNICATION



HOW COMPASSION
FATIGUE SHOWS UP
IN
COMMUNICATION

Hypothetical #3: “Why Did That Set Me Off?”

A client or colleague makes a minor demand, and you feel unusually irritated or shut down.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Definition and signs of compassion fatigue
- Why female attorneys are particularly vulnerable
- How compassion fatigue shows up in difficult conversations:
 - Over-apologizing
 - Avoidance of conflict
 - Emotional leakage or shutdown
- Ethical and professional implications:
 - Competence
 - Diligence
 - Sustainability in practice

MODEL LANGUAGE

(In the Moment):

“I need a moment to think before responding.”

“Let’s pause and revisit this shortly.”

(Afterward):

“I realized I was stretched too thin—here’s what I can realistically do.”

Key Insight:

Burnout changes how we communicate before we recognize it.

TOOLS FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



HYPOTHETICALS

Hypothetical #4: *Being Interrupted in a Meeting*

Hypothetical #5: Saying No Without Over-Explaining

Hypothetical #6: Inappropriate Comment or Tone

ANATOMY OF A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

- Purpose
- Impact
- Boundary

PRACTICAL LANGUAGE TOOLS

- Interruptions and being talked over
- Being labeled “emotional” or “aggressive”
- Saying no without over-explaining
- Addressing inappropriate or unprofessional behavior

LANGUAGE SWAPS

- Retiring minimizing language
- Replacing with clear, professional alternatives

INTERRUPTED DURING A MEETING

Model Language:

- “I’m going to finish my thought.”
- “Let me complete that point.”
- (Silence, then continue speaking)

SAYING NO

- “I’m not able to take that on right now.”
- “That won’t work for me.”
- “I’d need to remove something else to do that.”

INAPPROPRIATE COMMENT OR TONE

- “That comment isn’t appropriate.”
- “Let’s keep this professional.”
- “I’m not comfortable with that.”

Key Skill:

Short, neutral responses interrupt behavior without escalation.

TRAUMA-INFORMED COMMUNICATION

Hypothetical #7: Highly Emotional Client or
Colleague

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What trauma-informed communication is—and isn't
- Managing your own nervous system during conflict
- Maintaining empathy while setting firm boundaries
- Using pauses and silence strategically

MODEL LANGUAGE

- “I hear how upsetting this is.”
- “I’m going to focus on what I can do next.”
- “We need to lower our voices to continue.”

Key Skill: Empathy does not require absorbing distress.

CLOSING TAKEAWAYS

- Clear is not cold
- Boundaries protect professionalism
- Empathy and authority can coexist

REFLECTION

What is one conversation you've been avoiding that might become easier with clearer language?

THANK YOU!

