

The Legal Intelligencer

THE OLDEST LAW JOURNAL IN THE UNITED STATES 1843 - 2021

PHILADELPHIA, THURSDAY, JANUARY 14, 2021

VOL 263 • NO. 9 \$5.00 An **ALM** Publication

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LAWYER

Advice That Law Schools Should Offer to New Lawyers

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Special to the Legal

As many know, being a new lawyer is tough, and the transition from law school to law practice can be abrupt. While the practice of law does not have the artificial difficulty built into it by the curve, where you are constantly competing with classmates, the practice of law presents many more challenges. The practice of law is stressful, and law school does not prepare future lawyers for the long hours, business demands and the high-stakes decisions. When you're dealing with real live issues there's a lot more pressure than turning in a 20-page legal brief or preparing for a mock trial competition. Especially in the realm of family law, my day-to-day includes advocating on behalf of my clients most important pillars of their lives: children, finances and emotional well-being.

To combat the stressors from the practice of law, and regardless of the area of law, a new lawyer should remember these following five tips not taught in law school.

- Find a mentor.
- Develop your own style.
- Improve your soft skills.
- Practice civility.
- Get involved with your community.

FIND A MENTOR

You may be the smartest and best new lawyer, but every lawyer needs a mentor. Even if it is someone who reminds you to practice humility. For new lawyers, a mentor can be a partner at your firm, a law professor or another attorney you may have connected with at a local bar association networking event. Regardless of who that mentor is for you, that role should not be arbitrarily filled. A new lawyer should strive to find an attorney or group of attorneys who share common interests and provide professional guidance tailored to your needs.

In the legal field, mentors are particularly important because they take you under their wing, offering advice and support to help you establish your career. While a good mentor will evolve with you as you progress through your career, the most crucial time to have a mentor is when you



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begin your legal career. It is recommended that new lawyers and their mentor have honest discussions with each other about topics surrounding salary expectations, work-life balance and carving a career path. When your mentor knows what is important to you, he or she can tailor their advice accordingly. The benefit of selecting a mentor in the same legal field includes the added knowledge of he or she knowing the reputations of the other lawyers and firms. Depending on your relationship, your mentor may connect you with the right people in your desired field and may be willing to put his or her built up goodwill on the line for you.

DEVELOP YOUR OWN STYLE

As a new lawyer, some of the best advice I received from my mentor was to find my own style in the courtroom. It seems like a simple concept, but she said that too many attorneys try to be someone they're not. A new lawyer copying someone else's style is easy to spot because the new lawyer's actions are inauthentic. A client and particularly, the fact finder, will see through your actions.

For new lawyers, I am not suggesting to ignore the skills of successful trial attorneys. In fact, I seized every opportunity to observe great trial attorneys and tried to absorb their positive attributes. After observing numerous successful trial attorneys, I thought about what made them great. Besides the fact that these attorneys had practiced for many years, I realized it was their level of preparedness that stood out. So my advice to the new lawyers is to be prepared. Your style will develop naturally as you learn from your mistakes.

As a new lawyer, soft skills are the hallmark of a successful lawyer. A client wants to know that their attorney has the right tools to handle every situation.

IMPROVE YOUR SOFT SKILLS

Part of being a new lawyer is managing the politics in any organization, developing client relationships, and effectively managing support staff. A soft skill is a broad term that encompasses interpersonal communication, effective listening, time management and empathy, among others. Unlike law school, which is a hypercompetitive environment, your law firm is likely founded through successful teamwork. Furthermore, working well with the other lawyers and support staff in your office is only going to make you a better lawyer.

As a new lawyer, soft skills are the hallmark of a successful lawyer. A client wants to know that their attorney has the right tools to handle every situation. While some new lawyers think of themselves as the bulldog lawyer, that style of lawyering is not always effective given the situation. For instance, if a doctor brings one tool with her to surgery, she is ill prepared to help her patient. Similarly, if the lawyer is always aggressive, she is also ill prepared for handling a delicate custody matter or protection from abuse case. For new lawyers, by developing your soft skills, you will be more successful in managing your client's issues. Furthermore, soft skills are transferable to many aspects of the legal field, which is important particularly if you interact with a variety of personality types like I do with family law.

PRACTICE CIVILITY

During my years as law student, many law school professors preached the importance of civility. However, in the real world of family law litigation, I quickly realized civility is not as important to everyone. This lesson is apropos to all litigators. Dealing with adversarial opponents is one of the biggest hurdles that a new lawyer may face. New lawyers need to remember managing prickly opponents is just another skill to learn. The best way to deal with combative opposing counsel is by showing up to court, advocating for your client, and cooperating with opposing counsel for the benefit of your client. Remember, not everyone is going to be nice to you in the real world.

GET INVOLVED WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

While new lawyers should focus on establishing themselves as top attorneys in their field of law, they should also get involved and give back to their community. A lawyer's time is valuable, and the hours outside of work should be spent doing activities that are fulfilling, personally and professionally. Thankfully, there are many options available for new lawyers to get involved in the community. Although not the direct motivation, community involvement can have a lasting impact on a new lawyer's career. For new lawyers, some law-related opportunities include: joining your local bar association; regularly attending social events with other professionals; contributing to a continuing legal education course; and seeking leadership roles in programs related to your practice area.

I have found that most attorneys want to give back to their community, but they may not know where to begin. However, many new lawyers are unaware of how valuable their existing networks are for finding suitable community organizations to join. After consulting with your personal and professional network, new lawyers should join an organization that aligns with their values. In addition to the personal fulfillment from community involvement, a new lawyer has further expanded their network. •