

THE RECORDER

YOUR CAREER

Your first three years

Newer attorneys should take the following steps to build a solid foundation for their career



Gay Grunfeld

If you are anything like me, you left law school with three skills: how to apply *The Bluebook*, how to Shepardize a case, and how to study for an exam.

While these skills are necessary to the successful practice of law, they are hardly sufficient. Having embarked on the private practice of law, there may be many days when you feel utterly confused and lost. What follows are tips gleaned from 28 years in the law.

First, “[t]he law is a jealous [lover], and requires a long and constant courtship. It is not to be won by trifling favors, but by lavish homage.” Joseph Story’s hoary maxim, updated to acknowledge that a third of lawyers in the U.S. are women, remains as true today as when it was written in 1829. Practicing law at a high level requires an endless amount of work. To be at the top of your game, you will have to put in many hours. If you use those

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hours well, you will improve as a lawyer and obtain better and more interesting assignments, making practice more interesting and fun. But you will ultimately be required to work hard. If you don’t like to work hard, find another profession now.

Second, stay organized. Given the enormous complexity of the legal profession and the demands it makes on a young attorney’s time, careful time management and organization are critical to success. Create and maintain an organized task list for yourself. This list should be divided into big-picture goals, medium-term assignments and day-to-day priorities. Any time you receive an email asking you to do something, add it to your task list so it is not lost in the mountains of email in your inbox. The list may include some tasks you need to complete yourself, and other tasks that you need to follow up on to make sure paralegals or support staff complete. Look at the list every day and make sure you are prioritizing the projects that need to be completed that day. Spend at least an hour each week updating and revising your to-do list. Among the issues the list can cover are clients to pursue, networking contacts to cultivate, and skills to improve.

Third, take ownership of your law firm, its success and your practice. Although you may be a first-year associate hardly

ever billed out to clients, you are potentially the next partner of the firm. Act like it. Engage with every assignment and every person. Don’t just hand in a memorandum. Ask the partner what further research might be helpful. If asked to draft a motion, provide the memorandum, proposed order, declaration and Local Rule checklist for the filing. Follow up on the issues and the case. Use Google Alerts and frequent visits to your firm’s website to stay current on your colleagues and clients. Don’t just complain about a recurring problem or issue at the law firm. Propose a constructive solution. Even if that solution proves unworkable for other reasons, your senior colleagues will appreciate that you care about the outcome.

Fourth, don’t check your personality at the door. You enter the law firm as a unique person with a bright mind and many important connections already. Be who you really are and personally engage with the diverse and talented group of people around you. Home in on what you have to offer. You may have a unique life experience or skill — such as a foreign language or a background similar to a client or witness or a knack for technology — that sets you apart. Make use of those skills and background differences to improve the representation of your firm’s clients. At the

same time, try to integrate your personal life with your law firm life. They are not two separate worlds, but one whole. Your work colleagues may become your closest friends. Your closest friends may become your clients.

Care about the entire work place. Show up for the office party with your significant other. Ask about people's families. When someone does something nice for you, promptly write a thank you note. If a colleague writes an article or gives a speech, try to read it or show up. These small gestures will help you engage with those around you, and will enrich and deepen your relationship with them, enhancing your success at the firm.

This is especially true for the ups and downs you will inevitably encounter. While sitting at my desk in my office, I learned of the death of one of my children's baby sitters from AIDS, of the metastasis of my father's cancer, and of the breast cancer diagnosis of one of my closest friends. Notwithstanding a strict instruction I once received from a female partner to "never let the guys see you cry," experiencing grief at the office is a necessary part of being a lawyer. You and those around you will experience both grief and joy together over the years.

Fifth, make recommendations. Your time with busy partners and senior associates is limited. Don't use that time to play 20 questions. You are the person tasked with researching the law to the fullest, or understanding the file to the greatest extent. Use your knowledge of the file and the law to make recommendations about what the senior lawyers should do next. The worst they can say is, "Actually, I'm going to do something different based on my experience." But at least you will present yourself as a lawyer — a trustworthy counselor who can help a client make a decision.

Presentation and credibility also increase

the likelihood that clients will trust you. It's time to sit at the grown-up table. That means your demeanor, dress and manners should be serious. Do not chew gum, dress sloppily, go to work ungroomed, eat (unless at a breakfast/lunch/dinner meeting), or curse in front of the senior lawyers, because they are thinking about whether to take you to the next client meeting. And even if the client engages in all of the aforementioned "no-nos," he or she is not looking for a clone or a peer. He or she is looking for advice about a serious and complex problem.

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Sixth, communicate well. Keep partners and senior associates informed of your progress toward deadlines. It is important to meet deadlines set for you, including internal deadlines. If for some reason, however, you are not going to be able to meet a deadline, notify the partner or senior associate ahead of time that something has changed. If the partner absolutely needs the project by the original deadline, he or she may provide you with additional help to get it done, or may help you clarify priorities among competing projects. All of your assignments may seem equally important to you, but often a partner and senior associate can better

prioritize what must absolutely be done first. Waiting until the last minute to say that you can't meet a deadline (or submitting only a partially completed product at the deadline) does not help anyone. In the same vein, keep competing partners informed of how much work you have for each one, so they can make adjustments as necessary. Suffering in silence is a recipe for disaster.

Seventh, treat all of the firm's employees with respect. The file clerks, support staff, word processors and receptionists at your law firm are essential to your success. How you treat them demonstrates your character. In addition, as a decorated Tuskegee airman once said, if you are not nice to your mechanic, you don't come back from your flight. As the most junior lawyer on the team, you will be charged with asking the persons under you to stay late and help get projects done. Treating these employees kindly and with respect will make it more likely that you shine to the senior lawyers and clients you seek to impress.

Finally, promote your law firm and yourself. Go to events, write articles, volunteer for the bar association, network, join specialty and minority bar groups — become involved in the legal community. These activities will enrich your life, improve your community, and promote your firm and your practice. They will also help you find issues you are passionate about and can incorporate into your practice.

Your career is long. May it be endlessly interesting and distinguished.