



Practice Development

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Five Tips for Your Early Days of Practice and Beyond

Law school was challenging. For many of us it may have been the first time we struggled to succeed academically. It may have been the first time we learned what mental exhaustion really means. It may have been the first time we failed at something. Our professors helped us learn to think like lawyers under controlled scenarios and fixed hypotheticals. Internships, externships, and guided practicums helped. Your first several years of practice may demonstrate, however, that the best experience occurs on-the-job. Here are five tips for those early days of practice.

1. Find a Mentor

This goes beyond your boss, because there will come a time when you have a question that you might be unable or unwilling to ask your boss. Seek out a mentor in advance of this. If you work at a large law firm, you might have several mentors. If you work for a sole proprietor, you may find it helpful to network or join a few organizations before you find the right match. Regardless of your individual circumstances, this tip cannot be overstated. There will come a time when you are presented with a situation you do not know how to handle. In these times, guidance from a trusted mentor will be invaluable. In addition to learning the practice of law, a mentor can help you integrate yourself into a new work setting and introduce you to other professionals. A mentor can help you learn the right practice style, gain self-confidence, and critically, help you establish boundaries to manage and grow in the profession, while also growing as a person. Lawyers come in all shapes and sizes. Identifying a person or few people that have developed professionally in a way that you would like to emulate could help you early on.

2. Be Open Minded and Willing to Adapt

Unlike law school, the practice of law does not happen in a vacuum. Facts will develop, the law will evolve, and the need to contain all of it in a perfectly constructed box will feel enormous. While a mentor will help you learn legal skills or a practice area, becoming more adaptable is just as much about your own mindset and willingness. You may struggle to learn a new practice area or legal skill. Maybe work is slow, or you struggle with venturing into the business side of the profession. Whatever difficulty you find yourself up against, if you approach the obstacle with an open mind and eagerness to learn, odds are that you will find a way to complete the task. Being closed off to new opportunities and ways of doing things may slow your ability to identify a way to overcome the obstacle before you.

3. Reconsider How You Measure Success

Early on in my career I was told that “a good settlement is when nobody is happy.” This made no sense to me. I assumed a case would always have a clear winner and loser, and that the winner would be happy, and the loser not so



happy. The reality was that I had to learn how to be comfortable with a notion that seemed irreconcilable. Be sure that you know your clients' objectives, speak with the attorneys on your team, and be sure that you are measuring success realistically and with the right scale. If not, you may miss the opportunity to celebrate a win that may not immediately look like a win to you. On this point, utilize your mentor, be open minded to doing things differently, and always be willing to learn.

4. When You are Wrong, Understand Why You are Wrong

Being wrong is part of our profession (and life), and identifying how to be a better lawyer (and person) requires honesty with yourself and others. This is not a recommendation to call opposing counsel and explain why your legal position is not especially strong. Rather, the point is that if and when you are wrong, if you can understand why, it will help you to have a more complete and accurate picture for handling similar cases or issues in the future.

5. Take Care of Yourself Mentally and Emotionally

This one is easy to lose sight of because it is not directly related to the subject matter of our work. It is, however, directly related to becoming a well-rounded lawyer. There is a fine line between being resilient and silently suffering. Do whatever you must to be the former and avoid the latter. You will not be able to take care of your work if you do not take care of yourself. Connect with your peers or join networking groups. Outside of work, stay physically active, pick up a new hobby, develop other work-life balance routines, or see a counselor. There is no one size fits all approach. Above all else, always remember that there is no shame in asking for help. We all need it sometimes.

About the Author

Glenn A. Klinger is an attorney in the Chicago office of *SmithAmundsen LLC*, where he concentrates his practice on insurance coverage disputes involving commercial and professional policies. He also litigates commercial and bad faith cases, and advises clients on issues related to risk management and transfer. Mr. Klinger serves as the Vice-Chair of the IDC Educate Pillar.

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