

A LAW STUDENT'S GUIDE TO BEING A HAPPY, HEALTHY AND HONORABLE LAWYER

by Victoria V. Kremksi*

You may be thinking: Why should I read an article about being a happy, honorable and healthy lawyer, at this point in my life, when I am in law school, consumed with studying, exams, and strained finances? Whether you realize it or not, your legal career began the day you completed your applications to law school! How you react to situations, the responses you make to questions and the choices you make in your life, determine the type of lawyer you will become and influence your professional and personal satisfaction with life.

Our true character is evidenced by what we do when no one is looking, when we are stressed and when we are pursuing our ambition and desire. As a law student, life is full of stress in pursuing an ambitious and difficult goal. This is the time to establish positive coping and decision-making skills. Some lawyers will tell you that their not developing these skills in law school later led to failure, pain, and in some cases, disbarment.

Here are ten steps to implement, now, in your life, to make you a happy, honorable and healthy law student and future lawyer. Many of these steps are inter-related and some of them may surprise you:

STEP 1 TAKE TIME TO MAKE FRIENDS.

Life is a journey on an uncertain road. Taking the time to make friends gives you someone to enjoy the sunny spots with and someone to help you when the road gets dark, hard and frightening (and have no doubt, it will get dark, hard and frightening at times.) The value of a good friend is simply unquantifiable.



STEP 2 MAKE TIME FOR FUN.

Huh? I know what you are thinking – I know that you can devote every waking hour to your studies and still not get it all accomplished. Well, this is one thing that will most definitely NOT change when you graduate. The only change (though a significant and important one) is that you will get paid to have so much work that you are forever challenged to complete it timely! Just like an uncharged battery does you no good, if you are not “charged” you cannot do yourself or your future clients good. To cope with this, make (i.e. schedule) time to do whatever it is that recharges your battery – exercise, a hobby, sports. The important thing is to identify what energizes you and make time for it on a consistent basis.



STEP 3 BE NICE. TO EVERYONE.

Despite so much lawyer bashing, the legal profession is still respected, prestigious, and even considered glamorous. All those legal TV shows would not be so popular if this were not true. The flip side of this coin, though, is that everyone despises lawyers who believe we deserve glamour, prestige and respect. You are no more important than anyone else. You will find that file clerks, court clerks, secretaries and the mail runner can, and will, play key roles in your success - and maybe even save you from disaster. You need everyone in order to succeed, so be nice, to everyone.



STEP 4 LEARN TO PRIORITIZE.

Starting in law school, and continuing through practice, we are bombarded daily with countless tasks, details and requests that demand our time and attention. Learn to determine, quickly, what tasks need our immediate attention, what can wait, and what can be delegated and how to create an organizational framework to process all this. This is difficult in a culture that rewards and glamorizes working long hours, sometimes without considering whether those hours were spent fruitfully, whether alternatives exist to spending time in the office working, or whether it is even necessary. As any legal secretary can tell you, often lawyers’ “emergencies” result simply from procrastination and lack of planning on the part of the lawyer.



*Victoria V. Kremksi is Deputy Division Director, Professional Standards for the State Bar of Michigan.

STEP 5
**BE HONEST,
EVEN WHEN IT
HURTS YOU.**

The most important asset you can have in your career is your word – specifically your honesty and credibility. The only way to earn the title as an honest and credible attorney is to be honest. If you mess up, you have to tell your boss. And your client. You have to be honest with opposing counsel and judges. They will respect you for it. Good people have a remarkable capacity for understanding and forgiveness. The first time I told my boss I made a mistake, he gave me a mock glare



and replied: “Well, it won’t be the last time” and then helped me move on to rectify the mistake. The one time I had to tell a client that I missed a deadline for filing her claim, she began to cry. She then said that everyone makes mistakes, that I was the only attorney she ever had who really cared about her as a person and that she had confidence it would all turn out okay, one way or another. She was right, and gave me a lesson in trust and forgiveness I will never forget. Most attorneys have a story like this. You want to seek employers and clients who have this capacity.

STEP 6
**LEARN TO BE
PART OF A
TEAM.**

One of the unfortunate aspects of law school is that it encourages competition and “going it alone.” In the real world, there is no such thing as the successful “legal eagle.” Most law firms work in teams and attorneys are only as good as their team. You soon discover that everyone brings something valuable to the team. Learn to give, and receive, help – you will be more successful as a result.



STEP 7
**YOU CAN ONLY
SLICE THE
BALONEY
SO THIN.**

Lawyers are trained to advocate and “make an argument.” Part of the public’s frustration with lawyers is that in our quest to make an argument, we sometimes forget to analyze whether it is a “credible” argument. If the argument you want to make is not a credible one, then it is an argument you probably should not make. Maybe it is time to concede the issue. As my former boss used to say – “You can only slice the baloney so thin.”



STEP 8
**FAMILY
COMES FIRST.**

The demands and details of daily life can quickly distract us from the most important thing we need to remember – we are never guaranteed tomorrow. Someone we love very much, may not be here tomorrow. As important as work is, we need to strive to organize our life so that we make sure our family and those we love come first, and get the time and attention from us that they deserve.



STEP 9
**PROTECT
YOUR HEALTH.**

Your health is a precious gift. Without your health you cannot work and the more your health is compromised, the less effective you are at work. Pay attention to how you feel when you do not eat right, when you do not exercise. Trust in, and listen to your body. It will tell you what you need to do. This includes your mental health. When our car breaks down, we take it to a mechanic. When



our plumbing breaks, we call a plumber. We even go to a licensed professional to have our hair cut. Why then, do we think we can handle the sophisticated tasks of interpersonal relationships and dealing with life all by ourselves?

STEP 10
**NEVER CHEAT.
LEARN HOW TO
LOSE WELL.**

We all know that morally and ethically cheating is wrong. Cheating also has a pernicious and continual undermining effect. If you cheated on a law school exam, you never fully gain the confidence that you are qualified and can earn a good score on your own. If you cheated in law school, you will be tempted to cheat in practice, again, because you are unsure of your abilities. Receiving a disappointing grade is not easy. Losing a case is not easy. Get used to it, as learning to



lose gracefully and fruitfully is one of the most important skills you need to acquire to be a good attorney. You learn more from the cases you lose than the ones you win. Trust me, though, these losses will be tempered by sweet victories and great achievements. There is no greater thrill and reward than the satisfaction of winning, achieving and earning accolades, knowing that you did it fair and square.