

Stop Thinking (and Acting) Like a Lawyer

The mindset and skills that make you a great lawyer can get in the way when you are trying to build your practice, manage your firm, or grow your network.

By Stephen E. Seckler

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My son began law school in early September. As he begins his journey in learning how to “think like a lawyer,” I go back to something I’ve been pondering since I passed the bar in the late 1980s: Do people who think like lawyers gravitate toward law school, or does going to law school and practicing law change the way you think?

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In my opinion, the answer is a little of both. Law is a conservative profession and tends to attract people who are risk averse (as do accounting and medicine). In contrast, people who choose a career in business are thinking more about opportunity than about risk.

At the same time, what do lawyers do all day long? They help clients figure out what might go wrong and advise them on how to manage those risks. If you are already predisposed to avoid risk, practicing law reinforces your risk aversion.

Helping clients to effectively manage risk is what makes you a great lawyer. The problem is that the things that make you a great lawyer are things that can get in the way when you are trying to build your practice, navigate a career change, or become an effective leader.

In this article, I’d like to highlight some of the more typical personality traits of lawyers and suggest how you might want to modify your own behavior to generate more work for your firm, build a network that will uncover career opportunities, or lead your firm with greater effectiveness. *Note: Many of the ideas in this article come from the extensive research that has been done on lawyer personalities by Dr. Larry Richard, a former practicing lawyer himself. See [his website](#) for more information and many more resources on these subjects.*

Linear Thinking and a Focus on the Endpoint Can Foreclose Possibilities

Growing a law practice requires a considerable investment of time and energy. It can take years to build your reputation in a niche. And having a strong niche will make you more memorable (which is essential if you want to stay top of mind with your network). Ultimately, work will come when you build the right relationships with the “right” potential clients and referral sources, and those relationships can also take a long time to build. The path to success, however, is not linear.

When you are new to the practice of law, you are trying to figure out where you want to focus your energy. Until you enter the profession, it is hard to know what type of work will resonate and what types of clients you want to work with. As a junior associate, you also may not have much choice about the work you are assigned.

In the early years, it is important to keep an open mind and pay attention to the work you *do* like. The more you gravitate toward the things you enjoy, the more you will be energized to find more of that work. Developing a niche requires keeping an open mind (possibility for many years). But lawyers tend to prefer closure, hoping to solve the problem and get to the end.

Similarly, relationship building, which is the cornerstone of business development for all professional services, requires a lot of flexibility. You can create structure in your life that ensures that you are interacting with potential clients and referral sources (join a bar association committee, get active in a trade association, volunteer for a nonprofit cause you care about, coach youth sports, give presentations to community groups, etc.). But the relationships you build will probably not come from structured interactions. Relationships grow more organically. You get to know people when you meet for coffee, invite them to a baseball game, get involved in a nonprofit cause you both care about, work together on a political campaign, or talk to other parents on back-to-school night.

One of my best clients is a managing partner I met 20 years ago through a philanthropic organization. We were on a panel together, and over the years, we met for coffee periodically. We would talk shop, but we also spoke about many other things (family, the organization we both supported, etc.). Eventually, I began to do some recruiting for his firm, and, ultimately, I ended up working with him as his coach.

In the practice of law, there is an endpoint in your work. You are trying to get a deal done, file a motion, settle a case, or help a client comply with regulations. In developing a niche, the end point is not obvious, and even when you figure it out, you will always be tweaking it as the legal landscape changes. The same is true for the relationships that you believe will lead to paying work.

So, be organized and structured when you are acting as a lawyer, but be flexible when you are trying to build a practice, manage a department, or grow your network to find better career opportunities.

Analytical Thinking Can Get in the Way of Building Trusted Relationships

When you show up in the emergency room with nausea and extreme dizziness, you want a doctor who will figure out the root cause of your symptoms, not a doctor who shares the same taste in music and compliments you on your shirt. When your client thinks someone is violating her trademark, she doesn't want to know where you spent your summer vacation (although that might come up in the conversation); she wants you to stop the financial "bleeding" and get an injunction.

Like doctors in the emergency room, lawyers who place greater emphasis on facts, objective data, and logic can see problems more clearly in a way that is helpful to their clients.

On the other hand, if you want to cultivate your business prospects, that analytical thinking can get in the way of making a genuine personal connection. The foundation of most trusted relationships is not a detached, data-driven exchange of information.

The same is true when you are trying to be an effective leader in a law firm. If you want followers, try asking what you can do to support their success rather than criticizing them for having some typos on a brief.

Skepticism Can Also Be a Barrier to Relationship Building

As a group, lawyers rank high on skepticism. That skepticism is crucial in the practice of law. Great lawyers think a lot about what might go wrong for their clients. An effective lawyer anticipates risk.

But skepticism can be an impediment to building trusted relationships. And trusted relationships are the key to building referral relationships and in getting colleagues to adopt your vision.

A lawyer who wants to do a great job representing clients needs to wear his skeptic's hat when evaluating the other party's position in a deal or in a conflict. A lawyer who wants an accountant to refer corporate or real estate matters to him needs to build trust, not be skeptical of the accountant's choice of movies or restaurants.

A partner who wants input from associates on how to create the best hybrid work policy should ask for feedback and say thank-you. Marshall Goldsmith, one of the grandfathers of executive coaching, suggests that saying "but"

all the time ("I agree with you, but . . .") really shuts down the conversation and is a deterrent to receiving future feedback. Lawyers have a tendency to qualify a lot of their statements, and while that may be good lawyering, it doesn't build social connection and encourage conversation.

If you want to build a practice or lead effectively, focus on relationships.

You Don't Need to Prove You Are the Smartest Person in the Room

In law school, we are taught with the Socratic method, and we are encouraged to be prepared so we will look smart in class. We try to impress our professors by delivering eloquent analysis of the case law.

In leadership (and selling), listening is the key skill. You can't identify your client's pain if you don't listen. You can't align your colleagues with your vision if you don't let them talk.

People who are great listeners show they care. People want to hire people they know, like, and trust. You'll engender more trust and goodwill by being a great listener. That means listening 80 percent of the time and talking 20 percent of the time.

There will be plenty of time to give your opinion (and demonstrate your intellect). If you don't let your clients talk, you may be rendering an opinion about the wrong problem. If you don't let your referral sources say what is on their mind, they will feel like you are not interested in them. If you bark orders at your associate or paralegal and don't take time to find out what they need to get the job done, the work product may suffer (or they may seek greener pastures).

Listening in a nonjudgmental way is a great way to increase loyalty. "How can I help you be more successful?" is much more effective than complaining that your paralegal isn't detailed oriented. If your paralegals suggest that you are not giving them enough advance notice to complete the work, try thanking them for the feedback first without getting defensive (which is not to say you can't discuss the issue with them, but defensiveness should not be the starting point).

Feeling a Sense of Urgency Can Also Be an Impediment to Building Strong Relationships

Lawyers also rank high on the trait of urgency. Once again, having a sense of urgency is a good quality for a lawyer who is trying to get a deal done (or meet any kind of filing deadline). But urgency may be a hindrance in social interactions.

If your college roommate is comptroller of a company that you want to do business with, it makes sense to get together for lunch. You can see if there is any opportunity to do work for him or some indirect way to be helpful. But if your friend tells you it's looking like a busy fall, don't reach out again a week later. Give it a few months so that you can get together when your friend is under less stress.

You may never end up doing work for the company. Or it may take months or years to cultivate the relationship. Or your roommate might end up at another company where he *can* give you work.

Another client of mine just landed his best client. He met her when they worked together in private practice. The lawyer had left their old firm ten years earlier and went to a company that already had IP counsel. Periodically, my client invited his former colleague to meals, to panels where he was speaking, and even invited her to be on panels. Ten years later, the client moved to another company, and she was finally able to send work to my client.

Be a Risk Taker; Be More Resilient

As I already highlighted, being risk averse is an occupational hazard in the law. Lawyers, as a group, also rank low on resilience. We don't like to be criticized, and when we fail, we tend to blame it on ourselves.

A successful rainmaker takes a lot of chances and fails often. In baseball, a superstar is someone who bats .300 (failing seven times out of ten). You can be a superstar rainmaker if you bat .050 (landing business from five out of 100 interactions you have).

This means that you will have a lot of "failure" along the way.

Really, what this means is that business development is a volume business. To be successful in generating legal work, you want to be meeting a lot of prospects over time. Some will never turn into clients; some will never even return your phone calls or respond to your emails.

The point is to not take any of this personally. (As a trained lawyer, I can say that this is easier said than done—but ultimately doable!) Practice telling yourself that these individuals may be busy and their lack of response has nothing to do with you. Do that before you reach out. (If you want more on this, read about cognitive behavioral therapy.)

“I'm a Professional, Not a Salesperson”

Finally, professional identity can be an initial barrier to marketing. In my own experience, I was raised by a father who was a math professor and a mother who was a school psychologist. I remember my father calling businesspeople “operators.” Simply put, business was not respected in my household.

For many lawyers, selling feels dirty.

In my own 30-year journey, I've come to appreciate that selling legal services is nothing like selling used cars. If you like getting to know people, and if you like to find ways to be helpful, you can succeed in legal marketing. High-pressure sales doesn't work with high-ticket items such as legal services.

Succeeding in the Law Requires More Than Being a Good Lawyer

Skepticism, risk aversion, urgency, and analytical thinking may make you a better lawyer. But turn off those tendencies when you are trying to build your network and strengthen your business relationships. While the quality of your lawyering will surely impact your career, being able to generate work, land the right job, or lead your firm requires different skill sets. And, in the long run, those things will have just as much impact on your career happiness as your technical abilities.

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