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A 10-Year Reflection: Important Lessons From My Bosses

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Special to the Legal

As I sit here on day seven of quarantine, I started to think about what I wanted to write about for this article. After being away from the office for so long, I realized how much I missed my work, how much I actually enjoy what I do and how much I like my colleagues. I then started to reflect on my 10 years of practicing law. I have worked at three very different firms with three very different bosses. Being home from work with my children for so many days, I keep thinking of the fairytale “Goldilocks and The Three Bears” to describe my work experiences to date. One environment was too soft, one was too hard and the last one was just right. Yet, I realized that even if my previous places of employment were not the right fit for me, I still learned important lessons from all three of my bosses, my colleagues at each firm and even from myself along the way.

FIRM NO. 1—THE ONE THAT WAS TOO SOFT (FOR ME)

• Compassion.

My first boss was a very compassionate individual. He took great pride in helping the less fortunate. It is easy to get caught up in the practice of law and forget that your clients are real people who may be going through a difficult time. This is especially true in which I practice—family law. In this area of the law, you see good people at the worst point in their lives. Having compassion and empathy is so important to being a good family law attorney.

• Civility.

After granting an extension on a matter, I had requested opposing counsel grant me the same courtesy. When he refused, I was shocked and angry. After relaying the story to my boss, he explained that when he was a young professional and throughout his many years of practice, attorneys were civil to each other. He explained that he had noticed a severe drop in that civility over the years.

After that experience, I decided I would always try to be civil with opposing counsel. It is frequently said that attorneys



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should remember that clients will come and go but you will come up against the same attorneys again and again. This is sound advice.

FIRM NO. 2—THE ONE THAT WAS TOO HARD

• Hard work.

My second boss was by far the hardest worker I had ever met. He was an extremely driven person and was constantly thinking about new ways to evolve his business. He taught me the value of hard work. You will never be successful if you are not willing to put in the time and effort. Do not expect anything to be handed to you.

• Take care of yourself.

I was always amazed by the amount of energy my second boss had. Where did he find it all? I realized that he took great care of himself. He ate healthy, exercised and was an early riser (as a night owl, however, I did not appreciate those 5 a.m. emails he would send). If you do not take care of yourself, it is easy to get burned out. Being an attorney is a stressful job. It is easy to fall into bad habits such as eating unhealthy foods, not getting any exercise and failing to get adequate rest. To be a great attorney, you need to look after yourself first.

• Don't sweat the small stuff.

One of my more experienced colleagues at job number two always had great advice. It was nice having someone to lean on during those stressful periods, as supportive peer relationships are so important.

This colleague taught me to not sweat the small stuff. You will not win every case—no one does and if an attorney tells you they never lose, they are lying. If you did the best you could by being prepared and not taking unreasonable positions, you did right by your client.

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FIRM NO. 3—THE ONE THAT WAS JUST RIGHT

• Your reputation.

My new boss prides himself on his reputation. Every day he strives to do the best work he can for his clients. He has high expectations, not only for himself, but for the entire firm. When I started at this new job, I would often think that the amount of drafts and revisions we did was overkill. I then realized that my boss had spent his whole career building up his reputation. When a document goes out with his name on it, it better be perfect or as close to perfect as possible. I now put the same effort and take the same pride in my own work.

• Always be prepared.

The great attorneys I work with is one of the best things about my office. They are always thinking of new strategies and bouncing ideas off each other. When they go into court, they are always well prepared and every move has been well thought out in advance. Your clients deserve no less and judges appreciate attorneys who go into court prepared as their time is valuable.

• Don't be afraid to ask a stupid question.

When I started this job, I was always afraid to ask questions believing my bosses would think less of me. My boss always encourages me to ask questions if I do not understand. Even with all the experience he has, he will still ask questions if he does not understand an issue. This is also great advice when you are working with experts. They are there to assist you on behalf of your clients. Do not be afraid to ask them to explain a concept if you do not understand it.

• Remember work is important but so is your family.

As a young lawyer, you may be starting your family as you are growing professionally. One of my colleagues is very dedicated to her work. She comes to the office every day focused to get the job done. At the same time, she knows that it is important to focus on your family. She clearly makes them a priority and is a great example on how to balance family and work.

MY OWN LESSONS

• Manage client expectations.

As a new attorney, it is very tempting to fall into the trap of making great promises to hook a new client. Making promises that you know you cannot deliver is a mistake. When you do not deliver, you are left with a disappointed client and you have only yourself to blame. I do not mean you cannot and should not be optimistic during consultations, but you always need to be honest with potential clients.

• Don't be afraid to speak up.

Being the young associate, you are often leaned on to do all of the grunt work. You may have your own caseload but are also expected to assist the partners. I was always afraid to speak up when I had my own deadlines and needed to prepare for upcoming hearings. I realized that the partners do not know what is going on with my own cases if I do not speak up. Perhaps the assignment they gave you is not urgent and you can complete what you need to do first. Always ask when an assignment needs to be completed. It will help you manage your time better and you will be less afraid to speak up if you know you cannot finish the task by the expected due date.

As a young professional, you may find yourself changing jobs, looking to find the right fit for you. Remember to always be learning along the way. Your more experienced colleagues are so important to lean on for support. You can learn important lessons from your bosses. The great ones push you to do better. Finally, make time for self-care and for your family. As Dolly Parton said, “Never get so busy making a living that you forget to make a life.” •