

Welcome to the Lion's Den: Tips for Working Effectively with Office Staff, Paralegals, Partners and Court Personnel

Coming out of law school, I had the luxury of assimilating easily into my first job as an attorney at the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office. I had already received great mentorship the year prior as a volunteer. I was just shy of my twenty-fifth birthday, starting my career as a criminal prosecutor for one of the biggest offices in the country, if not the world. The Los Angeles District Attorney's Office is comprised of roughly one thousand deputy district attorneys who prosecute misdemeanor and felony offenses throughout Los Angeles County. Special Units include Hardcore Gangs, Sex Crimes, Family Violence and the Public Integrity Division. Even with what felt like a treasure trove of advice and countless opportunities to watch and learn from those whom I admired most, I still faced challenges. I will never forget my first couple of weeks handling a trial calendar with anywhere from twenty-five to fifty cases scheduled to be heard. *Daunting* is a bit of an understatement. At first, it felt like I needed to know everything about every file. I eventually learned that it was sufficient to read through the file, be generally familiar with the facts of the case, the criminal history of the defendant and have an offer for the resolution of the case. Sure, additional issues might arise for which a deeper understanding of one or more areas of the file would become warranted, but those issues would be noticed and set for another day. Beginning one's path in the legal profession is a steep learning curve and what one might call a *character building experience*.

This article is a compilation of tips that I would like to share with new lawyers about working effectively with office staff, paralegals, partners, and court personnel. It is broken up into subsections based upon professional categories given the logistical differences in their jobs.

Office Staff

Much like nurses are the lifeblood of hospitals, office staff are the lifeblood of the legal profession. If you work for a government entity, chances are the office staff has been at your place of employment for years if not decades prior to your arrival and chances are they will continue to be there after you rotate on to another assignment. They are typically underpaid and underappreciated. If we as attorneys are doing it right, the sentiment of appreciation that we express on Support Staff Appreciation Day extends beyond one lunch, beyond one day and becomes a daily climate in the work place. Tips are as follows:

1. Work to Help Them

Wait, what? *Yes, you read that correctly.* If there are little things you can do to streamline the work that they do, do them. Think Tom Cruise in Jerry McGuire, "Help me, help

you.” For example, ask your office staff member if they want assignments left on their chair or in an inbox. Ask what you can do to help streamline them in their work. Not only will it help you work better as a team, but in my experience, it helps communicate that their time away from their life outside of work is just as meaningful as yours. While you serve different roles, you are not better than they are and should be mindful that your words, actions and body language do not inadvertently communicate that you believe as such.

2. Patience

The woman sitting at front desk of the sound editing lab in my office had a great sign above her desk. It read, “Your timing is not my emergency.” Sounds simple enough, right? Ask yourself how you sounded when making a request the last time you needed something *yesterday*. Projecting the stress of your time-sensitive deadline onto your office staff definitely does not make things move faster. It’s worth cooling the jets, taking a few deep breathes, even explaining to the person *who is helping you* that you recognize that the situation is not their fault and apologize for the stress of the urgency. In my experience, when you are not dumping the stress of your day onto your staff’s lap, they are much better equipped and even willing to work miracles.

3. Take an Interest

Every year we had a Staff Appreciation Day which inevitably had food—good food. However, support staff would sit with support staff and attorneys would sit with attorneys. Every so often our boss would force integration which resulted in sideways eye glances and polite yet just slightly awkward mealtime conversations. Everyone, attorneys and office staff alike, were functionally nice and professional people. That wasn’t the issue. The issue was that office staff spent their days working and filling down time conversing with other office staff while attorneys spent their days working and filling down time conversing with other attorneys. It feels like you should know your office staff after working alongside them day in and day out so that asking them basic questions once a year doesn’t feel out of place. The little conversations throughout the year, in which you take an interest in someone’s kids, their weekend or their day communicate that you not only value the work that someone does for you, but that you value them as a person.

Paralegals

Paralegals are an invaluable addition to the legal profession, for which I have the following tips:

1. Take the Time to Teach

A paralegal with solid work product is good. A paralegal who has the tools to produce work product that fits your style and needs is priceless. You are the source of those tools. For

young attorneys, the challenge lies in figuring out just what those styles and preferences are so that you can communicate them. It's really easy to identify styles and preferences we don't like or want once the work is done. It's much harder to let people know ahead of time what is expected and/or desired. I have found that a lot more frustration comes with the former. I have also found that a lot more satisfaction from both the attorney and the paralegal comes from the latter. For example, when asking a paralegal to brief an issue, are you expecting in-depth legal analysis of each seemingly relevant case, a quick overview of the holdings, or some combination thereof centered on flushing out a particular question? This brings me to my next tip.

2. Give Clear Directives

Often paralegals have a number of projects going at any given time. Letting a paralegal know what specifically you need and when helps them prioritize and tackle their work. Deadlines are also very helpful, as the guess work that comes with the ambiguity of the statement: "I need this back sometime next week," can be stressful. Also, provide examples of prior complete assignments if possible. This allows paralegals to focus on execution rather than interpretation and it will save everyone time. Clear directives also save the time associated with having to go back and re-do assignments that could have been done correctly the first time.

Partners

We didn't have partners as criminal prosecutors. We did, however, have Deputies in Charge, Assistant Head Deputies and Head Deputies who wrote our performance evaluations and had a lot to say about career trajectory. My tips are the following:

1. Don't Bring Problems without Solutions

Your superiors are busy. If you find yourself in the position of making them busier with your conundrum, I have found it is helpful to bring possible solutions for consideration to the table. You demonstrate that you have already thought through the issue, attempted to problem-solve and now have a valid reason to be turning to them.

2. Be Proactive

In my world, being proactive meant swinging by my boss' office and asking if there were any handoff trials that needed a body (aka coverage). My boss, who was always very busy, would otherwise have to go through his personnel list and figure out who was free to take a trial. It was a win/win: I got trials and my boss had one less trial to handoff.

My advice is to make yourself available to opportunities to pick up the work load. Whether it's volunteering for a deposition or simply a court appearance, your willingness to be a team player and to take the load off of others will make you an invaluable asset to the practice.

3. Don't Complain

You went to law school, took and passed the bar. There is some part of you that is a glutton for punishment, or rather fancies taking on difficult tasks. *Embrace it.* Work will get overwhelming at times. Find a healthy way to cope and understand that everyone has something that they could complain about if they unleashed their beast. We would be a very miserable group of humans if everyone were to “let it all out” all of the time. Suck it up soldier; or at least, *suck it up at work.* Make a concerted effort to leave venting about work (and even life in general) at home, away from work so that you are best situated to be a positive addition to the practice.

Court Personnel

Court personnel are quite possibly the most underrated people an attorney will work with. Like nurses in a hospital or office staff in a legal practice, court personnel keep their world spinning. Get to know the court personnel. Take the time to introduce yourself, say hello and ask how their days are going. Take a little more time to listen and respond in a way that signifies you sincerely care. My tips for court personnel break down by role.

1. The Court Reporter

a. SLOW DOWN!

In case you're skimming this article and missed subsection (a), I'll say it again. **SLOW DOWN.** Court Reporters, by what I can only surmise to be magic, take down every word that gets spoken in court. They cannot capture the words of two people at once. They also cannot interpret and clarify inaudible expressions. It is very easy for attorneys to get excited and passionate in their arguments. Unfortunately for court reporters, excitement and passion commonly manifest in fast speaking. If you want a clean and accurate record, you need to slow down, take breaths and pause between witness/attorney exchanges as much as possible. I have found it helpful to let court reporters know that you will look to them to see whether you need to slow it down. Getting a panicked look of death from your court reporter is much better than a frustrated interruption in the middle of your closing argument because your court reporter just can't take it anymore.

The best advice I ever got on this issue was from a judge. She told me to go home, turn on the news and attempt to repeat everything that the news anchor said. Suffice it to say, I failed, miserably. When I returned the next day she asked how it went. The smile on her face told me she had asked this question before and knew the answer. After I confirmed her sneaking suspicion, she told me to imagine having to process everything that was said and type it out, or in the case of interpreters, translate it into a foreign language. I would like to say that experience turned me into a court reporter's dream attorney, but it didn't. While I am still very much a work in progress, it did broaden my

perspective and awareness. It also left me with the sincere belief that court reporters should be allowed to have foot pedal-activated buzzers that give us attorneys a tiny zap to our wrist every time we start talking like we're jockeys, racing at the Kentucky Derby.

b. *Provide Information*

Help the court reporter with logistics by offering your card for depositions and court appearances. For hearings or trials, it is also helpful to provide a list of witness names. If your hearing or trial involves uncommon words, like those you would typically find in the medical or pharmaceutical profession, provide the court reporter those words beforehand as well. Court reporters have word banks, which allow them to type in shorthand but produce words, phrases, and even entire subsections of pleas on their computer screens. Allowing them to prepare their shorthand to account for the potentially foreign terms of your matter goes a long way. Not only does it make their job easier, it demonstrates that you are considerate of them.

2. *The Court Clerk*

a. *Wait to Approach*

Most court clerks with whom I have worked do not want to be approached while the judge is on the bench. If waiting until the judge steps down isn't an option, wait until there is a break between cases. Often clerks are busiest right after a matter is called because the next court date is often the last piece of disseminated information and the clerk then needs to log the information accordingly. Waiting patiently for the clerk to finish whatever it is he or she is working on has always been appreciated in my experience. *Trust me*—the court clerk knows you are there.

b. *Ask About Dates Prior to the Case Getting Called*

Figure out roughly when you and opposing counsel are available to return to court and ask the clerk if that is a good week for the court. The more you can iron out timing prior to the calling of your case, the smoother the record will be and the clerk can anticipate the next date.

3. *The Bailiff*

a. *Introduce Yourself*

The bailiff, like the court reporter, is someone who an attorney could very easily not have contact with while running in and out of court appearances. Some bailiffs really don't care whether you acknowledge their existence. Others are bothered by it. In my experience, bailiffs, like anyone else, appreciate being acknowledged and appreciated. One defense attorney referred to our bailiff as "bailiff." She thought she was being

respectful. Every time she finished a court appearance and left, he would say, “I have a name!” The lesson here is do not make assumptions about how bailiffs want to be addressed. It is better to use names or to ask.

b. Be Patient

Bailiffs are responsible for the security of the courtroom, which includes escorting inmates in and out of court and being present when the judge is on the bench. If you need to see your client or need anything at all from the bailiff, phrase your request in terms of when they have a free moment. While the bailiff may not appear busy to you, looks can be deceiving and he or she may not in fact be in a position to help you at that moment.



About the Author

Sarah Yacoub is a former Los Angeles County Deputy District Attorney of six years. She relocated to the Twin Cities where she found Slice Law, Inc., a criminal defense and family law practice that services Minnesota and Wisconsin. She also works as a part-time public defender for Ramsey County and takes cases for the Wisconsin Public Defender. She is licensed to practice law in California, Minnesota and Wisconsin.