

Getting Back to the Basics

By Angela Starry

Graduating from law school and passing the bar exam are many things: exciting, relieving and fulfilling, to name a few. Years of late-night studying and stress finally culminate to earning a J.D. degree, and with a little luck and some good timing, a career that will make those years of study and stress all worthwhile. That being said, there are certain things, very important things, that a J.D. and a passing score on the bar do not prepare you for as a new attorney. The following four pieces of advice should be learned sooner rather than later in order to avoid career-debilitating pitfalls.

First and foremost, new attorneys should realize that graduating from law school does not mean that you should, or can, stop learning. In fact, the vast majority of your legal education only just begins once the textbooks and study groups are a thing of the past. The real learning begins when you start your career as a new attorney. New attorneys should be open to the continued learning process. This may sound very much like common sense, but it's awe-inspiring just how quickly that bit of common sense can be banished to the deepest annals of our memories once we've started our careers.

One of the biggest pitfalls that I have witnessed with new attorneys is the belief, however inaccurate and fleeting (and hopefully it's very fleeting), that the learning ended on that last day of law school. As a new attorney, you are not ready to answer every legal question that comes across your desk. Be assured that law school does not necessarily prepare students to handle many real-life client and/or work environment situations. New attorneys should understand and accept that they will not have the answer, and even if they have an answer, it may not always be the right answer. Knowing how best to work with opposing counsel, department leaders, administrative assistants, court clerks and a vast number of other people in numerous situations and under the pressures of money and time, will only come with experience and an openness to learn.

Second, new attorneys should take advantage of the knowledge and experience of the more seasoned members of their law firm, organization or company, including non-attorneys. You do not always need to go it alone when navigating the most appropriate path through difficult legal conundrums. Make an effort to build relationships with other attorneys, legal professionals and business people within your law firm, organization or company, and learn from them. You do not have to sit alone behind your computer screen racking your brain to recall a law school lecture or desperately searching for information that someone else, who is likely very near and accessible to you, has already discovered. More often than not, the information you need is just a short walk down the hall or a quick phone call away, and you may make a good career connection in the meantime.

Third, and this goes hand-in-hand with my second point, new attorneys should not be afraid or embarrassed to ask questions. Ask away and do so unabashedly...as long as the questions are not inappropriate. No one wants to feel embarrassed or inadequate, but asking questions and getting the answers only helps us become better advisers to our clients, which should be the main focus in our practice of law. In my experience, new attorneys do not want clients or managers to think they don't know the answer because they don't want anyone to think that they're not up to the job, and the idea of *perceived* failure is scary (notice I used the word "perceived"). So, sometimes, in lieu of asking a "dumb" question and facing the very slim risk of embarrassing ourselves, we silently nod our heads and then

frantically try to Google the answers in search of the missing information later on. Trust me, this is not efficient or effective, nor is it the best way to assist your client, and you'll drive yourself crazy. When in doubt, just ask and you will be thankful that you did.

These second and third pieces of advice took me a few years to learn. I wanted to prove, to myself as much as to others, that I was an independently-capable attorney. I wanted to show that I didn't need to rely on someone else's research or knowledge to come up with sound advice for my clients. I was afraid to ask questions because I thought my boss, or my client, would think that I wasn't up to the task of resolving the issue-at-hand. I didn't want to risk appearing as though I wasn't capable of doing my job. This was a mistake. I would often find myself anxiety-ridden over relatively simple situations because I didn't want to reach out to someone for help. I would even go so far as to politely turn down help from people who asked if I needed it, even though I knew I did. This led to countless unnecessary late-night research sessions and unbillable hours. Sometimes these late nights would even yield the wrong answers, much to my chagrin, all because I wouldn't swallow my pride and ask for help. When it finally dawned on me that accepting help from other professionals did not equate to failure, my work-life balance became much more stable and efficient. I realized that learning from others is a large part of the practice of law, and a necessary one. It's a lesson I will never forget.

Finally, network, network, network. Regardless of whether you are responsible for finding all of your own clients, whether you are fortunate enough to be provided with enough work to fill up your billable hour quota, or whether you have moved in-house, networking with colleagues and other professionals is invaluable. A fair warning: this can be more difficult than it seems. Networking was, and probably always will be, one of the hardest things for me to do. As a new attorney, I was not overly comfortable getting up in front of a networking group and talking about myself. I felt awkward and concerned that I was coming across as too sales-pitchy. During my first year or two out of law school, I was not yet confident in my legal abilities, and I was afraid that I would embarrass myself. I had to force myself to attend various young professional and new lawyer events. However, networking was required at the firms that I worked for, and, looking back, I'm thankful that it was. Attending networking events provided me with two main things: opportunities and confidence. Each time I attended an event, I met new people, built relationships and practiced my public speaking. Networking proved to be invaluable for me. The key was to focus on the fact that it was a learning experience, and an experience that proved fruitful for my career.

It can be daunting to push yourself into a professional or networking group, not knowing anyone and not loving the idea of having to start out by making small talk. I'll admit that I'm guilty of not taking my own advice from time-to-time when it comes to networking. However, I do know from very personal experience that networking can go a long way for you and your career. Please never underestimate the potential that can yield from connecting with people, even if that potential comes months or years down the road.

When I look back over the past few years I realize that I, too, was provided with much of this advice, and I did not always take it. I knew that I should, but would make excuses for why I wouldn't (some of which I've listed in this article). When I did let my fear, and maybe a little pride, slip away and I started following these tips, things got a little easier and I became a better attorney and more valuable to my clients. Please trust me when I say that you will feel better about yourself, more confident in the advice you're providing your clients, and more effective in your career if you follow these seemingly simple

steps. Every once in a while, do a little self-reflection and just ask yourself if you're following these tips, *actually* following them. If you are, you're well on your way to becoming an effective attorney. If you're not, re-focus and remember that we learn through open-mindedness, experience and the ability to connect with others.

About the Author:



Angela Starry graduated from William Mitchell College of Law and was admitted to the Minnesota bar in 2010. After graduation, she worked at the law firm of Miller & Kellermeier, P.A., and then at Vox Law, LLC, where her practice focused primarily on the areas of Real Property and Estate Planning. Thereafter, Ms. Starry took an in-house counsel position at Phillips-Medisize Corporation, a medical device contract manufacturer based out of Hudson, WI. Ms. Starry is currently in-house counsel for Pentair Inc. at its location in Anoka, MN.