

A GOOD CHARACTER



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THERE ARE MANY FINE MOVIES WITH LAWYERS AS MAIN CHARACTERS—Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Daniel Kaffee in *A Few Good Men*, and Jan Schlichtmann in *A Civil Action*. However, in my opinion, Vincent Gambini, the outspoken Brooklyn attorney representing his cousin and a friend in rural Alabama in the 1992 hit *My Cousin Vinny*, has to be included on this list. For many attorneys, Vinny may be more relatable than Atticus. Vinny vocalizes statements that many lawyers think but won't say. Take, for example, his seven-word opening statement—"Everything that guy just said is bull\$#*%!" In the movie, Vinny's professionalism in the courtroom became a character in and of itself.

Vinny's case already had to rely upon testimony about tire marks, positraction, and the optimal boiling time for grits, but due to his struggles with professionalism and his courtroom demeanor, Vinny had additional hurdles to jump.

Judge Chamberlain Haller: *What are you wearing?*
 Vinny [wearing a black leather jacket]: *Huh?*
 Judge Haller [angrily staring at Vinny]: *What are you wearing?*
 Vinny: *Um ... I'm wearing clothes. I ... I don't get the question.*
 Judge Haller: *When you come into my court looking like you do, you not only insult me, but you insult the integrity of this court!*
 Vinny: *I apologize, sir, but, uh ... this is how I dress.*
 Judge Haller: *Fine. I'll let you off this one time. The next time you appear in my court, you will look lawyerly. And I mean you comb your hair, and wear a suit and tie. And that suit had better be made out of some sort of ... cloth. You understand me?*
 Vinny [not comprehending]: *Uh ... yes. Fine, Judge, fine.*

This scene reminds me that something as simple as your attire in the courtroom can affect your ability to represent your client. Anything that distracts the judge or jury from the issue is not good for your client. I equate it to walking into court unprepared. As attorneys, we are to be respectful while being steadfast and zealous advocates for our clients. It is a delicate balance.

Never let the client compromise your ability to be professional. Clients have been known to make unprofessional demands, but remember the client is not the one driving the bus. I know that it is difficult to deny a client's request; after all, clients pay our bills. No one wants to lose clients, but I would rather lose one than lose my credibility with the court or opposing counsel. Do not let a client dictate your moves or adversely affect your reputation. You are bound by the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct. They are not.

Another common mistake is to personalize the client's case. We should not take on our client's emotions. Atticus knew this. But it is so easy to get engulfed in the case and forget this simple concept. It might be worth checking out TYLA's *Attorney-Client Relationship* guide, available at tyla.org. When our lines are blurred, we are more prone to become aggressive with opposing counsel on issues by refusing to accept the weakness of our own arguments. A good lawyer is willing to concede that certain points are challenging, thereby retaining credibility.

You have one reputation—guard it! Now I am the first to admit that I've had an *off* day. We all have bad days. And when we do, it is important to do what we can to make sure that this single day does not define us or make a lasting dent on our reputation. Take a deep breath and apologize—it can go a long way.

In *My Cousin Vinny*, Vinny had to apologize *many* times to the court. But once he developed into a professional, Vinny was able to win the respect of the community and, eventually, the judge.

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