

The Top 10 Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me When I Began Practicing Law

BY TRAVIS KETNER

Sobriety matters (and mental health, too). My father once told me, “Many a good career has crawled down the neck of a bottle and died.” This warning includes lawyers with mental health problems. Alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and mental health are serious issues. If you are suffering, please seek help.

Ethics are not just for young lawyers. Ethics and professional competence are two fundamental parts of a lawyer’s reputation, which is how he makes a living—the stronger the reputation, the richer the lawyer. A young lawyer seeking a mentor needs to know that he will be associated with the mentor by peers, judges, and members of the courthouse staff. Choose accordingly.

Do your own homework. It is important for successful lawyers to remain current on the legal issues in their field or fields. Additionally, while all lawyers are not afraid to copy something that another lawyer has done with great success, it is vital to know why it worked. A great motion or jury argument is not a magic spell; it must be fully understood by the lawyer in case further questions arise from the bench or elsewhere (and they will).

Be nice to the staff. The currency of the courthouse is “stroke,” and the lawyer with the most is often able to accomplish things that amaze mere mortal attorneys. The easiest way to cultivate stroke is to be nice to the courthouse staff. The clerks, bailiffs, custodians, and others who work in the courthouse have an amazing amount of power to make things happen. A postscript for new attorneys: The staff has been in the courthouse longer than you, and they are not impressed that you are a lawyer.

Make it fun. Lawyering is an enormous amount of fun. It is not laugh-out-loud fun, but it is one of the greatest mental challenges available. Take advantage of the opportunity to be paid to pit yourself against other lawyers in a daily battle of wits.

Save your money. It will not be long into your career before you will meet lawyers who have squandered fortunes great and small. You may hit a windfall case (and I hope you do) or you may spend your time helping the underprivileged (and I hope you do). Regardless of your career path, you should save your money just in case.

Specialize. The best way to be successful as an attorney is to learn one area of the law better than everyone else. Find a legal discipline where you can never learn enough and each wrinkle in the law is an exciting development. Others may suffer from MEGO (“my eyes glaze over”) when you describe your work, but this effort will pay off professionally and personally.

Know thyself. Hubris is a brutal teacher. Learn your strengths and weaknesses. Most important, do not overextend your abilities by entering into areas of the law where you have no experience.

Grounding. It is easy to get caught up in the practice of law to the exclusion of everything else in your life. Find something outside of the law that provides grounding. Your law career is not enough to provide the psychological and emotional anchor we all need to be fulfilled as human beings.

Choose a mentor. The choice of a high-quality mentor who can help you develop professionally is vital to a successful career. Find an older lawyer who shares your values, ethics, and philosophical approach to our profession. If you cannot find someone, call me and I promise to help you. **TBJ**