



WHAT YOU DIDN'T LEARN IN LAW SCHOOL

# Survival Skill No. 6 for Lawyers: Bring Your Authentic Self to Work

Be honest with yourself and others about your emotional health.

By Link Christin

Today, we bring together all the survival skills for lawyers we've discussed over the past five months: developing emotional resilience, beating long-term stress, staying grounded during difficult cases, balancing professionalism and compassion, and letting go of anger. What I've suggested over the course of this series is a new paradigm for what it means to be a lawyer.

Our success as lawyers depends on us honoring who we truly are.

## Say Farewell to the Old Model

I first conceived of this series after seeing far too many lawyers in their 40s and 50s burned out from the stress, pressure and emotional turmoil of practicing law. These lawyers often struggle with substance use and may also have issues with depression, anxiety or PTSD. While it is my mission to help those who struggle so, it would be far better for lawyers to learn healthy coping skills to manage these pressures from the very beginning of their careers. They don't teach these things in law school, and they really should.

The traditional law firm model – where young lawyers work themselves nearly to death as they move up the ladder to become partner — is no longer effective, either for the lawyers or the firms. The new standard we need is simply this: Bring your authentic self to work.

That doesn't mean wearing shorts and flipflops. Being authentic simply means to be honest with yourself and others about your emotional well-being. Forget how you're "supposed to act" as a lawyer, that you're required to devote yourself to your work at the expense of everything else in your life. That path is devoid of self-care and will jeopardize your emotional and physical health.

It comes down to everyday issues: How we treat our clients, staff, partners, superiors and even ourselves. As lawyers, we are often our own worse enemy. We beat ourselves up in our quest for perfectionism. We've talked about compassion, love and empathy for those around us and we must also apply that approach to ourselves.

Lawyers must create an environment where they can deal with personal and professional behavioral issues in a timely way rather than internalizing them only to have them surface later in more dangerous and destructive ways. We shouldn't expect everybody to embrace or even like our authentic selves. But, at the end of the day, our success as lawyers and our happiness and stability in life are premised on honoring who we truly are.

## Takeaways to Help You Be Your Authentic Self

In considering the other posts in this series, here are five key takeaways, all of which apply to being authentic:

**Be honest with yourself and others.** By that I mean, be honest about how you are doing. Are you enjoying practicing law? Does your work satisfy you? Are you handling it in a balanced, healthy way? That requires self-knowledge and the willingness to speak honestly with appropriate people who can help create an environment where you can be both successful and healthy. I experienced burnout during my tenure as a litigator years ago and confided in my supervisor. Together we took practical steps to address the danger. I saw a therapist. We hired someone full time to help with the workload. Instead of viewing this as a sign of weakness, the firm viewed it as an opportunity for professional development.

**Take care of yourself and strive for balance.** Self-care is your responsibility. It's easy to blame the firm, clients, colleagues or managers, but that's a victim mentality. It's your responsibility to advocate for your own health and well-being. Maybe that means setting aside time first thing in the morning to do yoga or meditation or taking time for activities with friends and family. The demands of the job may leave us feeling like we're a ball in a pinball machine, and that it's out of our control, but that's not true. No matter what the circumstances, you have control over your response. Strive to make healthy choices.

**Build healthy relationships.** Take some time to know the people around you and let them get to know you. Nurture your nonprofessional relationships as well, with your spouse and family, your friends and neighbors. It's easy to get pulled into the whirlwind of work, to focus on getting our job done. That's what we're paid for, after all. But it can leave us in a world that is isolated. When things start to break down, we don't have the relationships to call on for help.

**Build a support network.** The healthy relationships we've built can also provide us with support when we need it most. It's good to have a trusted colleague who can counsel you through tough circumstances at work, or who understands what you are going through when you are faced with tough personal circumstances at home. A problem shared is a burden relieved. Many of the survival skills we've explored touch on compassion and resiliency, which are built on reaching out and connecting with people in ways that are both pleasurable in good times and supportive in challenging moments.

**Establish boundaries.** Young lawyers — and even those in midcareer — often fail to set healthy boundaries between work and home life. If you don't set boundaries, you will receive client calls early Sunday morning and routine last-minute requests by colleagues to work overnight. You need boundaries so that you have time for balance in your life — playing with your children, picnicking with friends, enjoying dinner out with your spouse, or watching a movie as a family. There's a perception that you must be available 24/7 to be seen as the go-to person, integral to the firm and, ultimately, a successful lawyer. Frankly, the opposite is true, because the lack of boundaries increases the risk of burning out.

## **Redefining Success**

Ultimately, we must redefine what it means to be successful at a thriving law firm. It is never too late to be introspective, to consider whether the values of a law firm promote wellness, and to reflect on whether your passion and purpose is fulfilled. It's important to be open to possibilities. Accept that you may need to review and tweak your practice area or determine whether your workload is feasible. I also encourage you to seek support for behavioral issues such as anxiety, depression or substance abuse. As lawyers, we have a vested interest in achievement for ourselves and our practice. If we prioritize our wellness, we create a foundation for long-term success.

*Disclosure: Caron Treatment Centers offers recovery programs for legal professionals that address the unique pressures and demands lawyers and their families face.*

Illustration ©iStockPhoto.com

## **Subscribe to Attorney at Work**

Get really good ideas every day for your law practice: Subscribe to the Daily Dispatch (it's free). Follow us on Twitter @attnyatwork.