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BE DIFFERENT

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As new lawyers, most of us focus intently on learning our chosen areas of law and understanding how the legal system can be used to benefit our clients. While it is vital to know and understand the rules, one of the most important aspects of our professional development is often overlooked. Whether your professional goals include rising to the top of your field or fighting tirelessly for the underdogs, you will be more effective and successful if you learn how to develop and manage your relationships with your clients.

Throughout law school, we are “trained” on the law and taught various tools to utilize in applying legal concepts. Everyone who graduates law school and passes the bar is hypothetically capable of researching and later applying statutory rules and abstract legal theories to a set of facts and circumstances in an effort to solve specific, individualized problems. To that end, every lawyer should continue to strive to advance the interests of those who retain us to perform legal services. But it is important that each new lawyer understand that these skills alone will not set you apart from the others in the saturated profession you have become a member of. In order to be successful, you must *be different* – you must focus on the way you serve your clients on a personal level.

I encourage each new lawyer to focus on your clients as individual people – give them the attention and service they deserve. The attorney-client relationship is sacred and therefore has various formal as well as informal requirements and expectations. The attorney-client relationship often begins with an initial consultation. During an initial consultation, you will typically have the opportunity to get to know your client personally and discover the facts and circumstances of the client’s particular legal situation. The initial consultation is often also the time when you inquire about your client’s goals, discuss expectations and what can reasonably be accomplished, and come to an agreement regarding fees and expenses for legal representation. While this initial consultation process can become somewhat routine, I urge you to ensure your relationships with your clients do not. In an effort to assist you in reaching this goal, I propose the following three ways to create healthy, respectful and productive relationships with your clients. Not only will such relationships be more pleasant for you as a practitioner, they will also help to ensure more successful outcomes and final results.

Be honest with your client. As an attorney, your integrity is of the utmost importance. If a client can no longer trust you, their faith in your abilities is lost. Your client came to you for help. The client does not need you to sugar coat the truth. Guaranteeing a result is never a sustainable, nor ethical, approach. Being dishonest and/or guaranteeing a specific result will lead to unreasonable and misleading expectations, and eventually a disgruntled client. Be up front with your client; fully explain their options and potential outcomes. While their options and potential outcomes may not meet their expectations, you will earn their trust, and business, because you were honest with them. If you have to promise unrealistic outcomes to get a client's business, you will virtually guarantee a dissatisfactory attorney-client relationship for both parties involved.

Communicate with your client. While Rule 1.4 of the Ohio Rules of Professional Conduct provides you with an outline of how you must communicate with your client, I insist you press further in your attempt to connect with your client. There is no doubt that as an attorney you must respond to client requests and promptly inform your client of decisions or circumstances with respect to their case – but proper communication involves more than a timely and rote recitation of pertinent information. The *way* you communicate with your client is key. This aspect of your representation may tend to benefit or hurt you more than any other.

Strive to create a personal connection with your clients. Be open about yourself during your conversations. This does not mean that you need to share private and personal information with your clients, but it is possible to be both professional and personable. At the right time, it is okay to have a sense of humor. Having a sense of humor can lighten a tense moment or fill a void in your conversations. When they discuss their family or outside interests, remember to follow-up on those topics the next time you see or talk to them. You want your client to feel comfortable talking to you. You want your client to perceive you as a "real person" who can be trusted and relied upon.

Simple communication can also be an effective way to show your client that you care not only about their case, but him or her personally as well. Use words and language your client can understand. Sometimes, we have a tendency to sound less like a lawyer and more like a "real person" during a quick phone call or email exchange. Brief but frequent communications can do more to enhance client relationships than the occasional, long status letter. Even if there are no new developments in a client's legal matter, reach out to him or her briefly to reinforce your commitment to representing them.

Sometimes the easiest way to communicate with your client is to listen. Listening allows an attorney to realize what the client really wants or what's in their best interest. Be available when your client needs you. When your client calls and requests to speak with you, make it a point to take their call personally. Having a staff member repeatedly take and/or return client calls can create a barrier between you and your client. Making yourself available and listening to your client are essential parts of the communication process.

Respect your client. Be a professional. Your client expects you to treat them with respect. Your client will respect you more if you act professionally in the course of your representation. They are also much more inclined to refer future business to you. As an attorney, your every move is under a microscope. Set an example for others by focusing on the very fundamental aspects of professional behavior.

Be courteous and use good manners when communicating with everyone. Not only is it important that you respect your client, it is just as important that you respect others in the presence of your client. This includes treating opposing counsel and parties with courtesy and respect. In addition to being respectful in your communications, demonstrate respect by being punctual. Show up for appointments and hearings on time. Meet deadlines once you commit to them. Do not forget that while a particular legal matter may seem routine to you, it may involve very sensitive issues from your client's perspective. Keep discussions about these issues private so as not to embarrass your client or cause additional distress. One of your goals is to ease your client's burdens; your conduct should never be the cause of additional distress.

Acknowledge your mistakes or shortcomings and take responsibility for them. Everyone makes mistakes and misunderstandings happen. Everyone also hates excuses! If you make a mistake, or if there is a misunderstanding with a client, accept responsibility and work to resolve the issue rather than attempting to shift the blame elsewhere, such as onto the court, a staff member, or an opposing party or counsel.

All too often as attorneys we get wrapped up in the law and forget to focus on what is most important to our representation – the client. There are no guarantees in the legal profession, but if you work hard and treat your clients well, they will have confidence in you and will greatly appreciate your representation. They will feel lucky to be your clients. While there are various other ways to create healthy relationships with and successful results for your clients, I am hopeful that these tips will enable you to think outside the box, be creative and most importantly ***BE DIFFERENT***.