

Reputation Is the Key to Success for a Young Lawyer

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Congratulations! You've studied for the LSATs, gained admission to a law school, graduated, passed a bar or two, and are among the fortunate population to land a job. Now you must face the most difficult task of all: figuring out what kind of lawyer (and person) you want to be. Don't be fooled, this is not an article reviewing how to pick a type of law to practice; it is about taking a reflective look inward and deciding what you want your reputation to be and how to achieve that objective in the years to come.

I'm sure some of you are thinking that passing the character and fitness portion of a bar exam is all that matters and now you are free to do as you please without repercussions. This could not be further from the truth. How you act—in public, to clients, toward other attorneys, members of the judiciary—in your first five to seven years of practice is critical to how successful you will be later. Why? Because everything you do contributes to your reputation and what kind of lawyer (and person) people perceive you to be.

Your reputation is an extension of your character, and we are in an industry where you live or die by your reputation. So important is reputation in the law that we, as lawyers, are heavily regulated to ensure some modicum of ethical and appropriate behavior. Such regulations, however, should be the baseline of how you act as a lawyer (and a person). In a profession full of natural-born gunners and highly driven individuals, do you really think doing the bare minimum will help you stay relevant and successful?

The answer, of course, is no. Not that commingling funds or making false statements is great, but that alone is not going to get you a referral from a fellow attorney or a new client calling you. I'm sure all of you reading this can think of at least one person (or more) who has not been disbarred because they do not violate any regulations, yet you would never recommend them because of their reputation. Therein lies the critical distinction. Doing enough and doing better are very different standards to live by.

The problem is that young lawyers so often forget to think about their reputation beyond the office. This, of course, is no real surprise. Motivated and eager young attorneys are consistently conditioned that internal reputation is paramount. While not wrong, this approach ignores a finer point: Your reputation is bigger than the four walls around you and workplace reputation is but one aspect. Reputation extends to every part of your life and we must be cognizant of certain actions that can help safeguard and grow how others perceive us:

Treat Others With Respect and Courtesy

Think back to the person(s) above who you would not recommend because of their reputation. Was it because this person was rude, hard to work with, condescending (all of the above and more)? Probably. Because every situation you are in, whether as an attorney or a private citizen, affects your reputation, it is important to always consider your actions. Never forget that anyone may be a client at some point and you never know who may be your boss or even a judge ruling on your case one day.

Treating everyone with respect and courtesy now will engender a reputation that can only benefit you later.

Avoid Lying and Over-Inflating Experience

With some exception, young lawyers are generally ambitious, driven and hungry for work. These qualities are what make us so marketable to employers. Yet, these qualities also pose a risk for young lawyers who may not know what they are doing and are too proud to take the time to ask questions and learn. The quickest way to hurt your reputation is to let your ego get the best of you and end up in a situation where you do harm to a case, or worse, your employer. People tend not to remember whether you asked follow-up questions or completed an assignment on time. However, what they do remember is what you did wrong, particularly if that wrong stems from a lie or failure to be proactive in understanding the issues.

Forgo Pettiness and Rumors

At a time when American culture is oversaturated with tabloid fodder and reality television that rely on and even coax drama and backstabbing, it is all the more important that you let that drama play out elsewhere and avoid such situations in real life. Whether you practice in a big city or a small town, there's always gossip, and the people who engage in that gossip earn a reputation for being untrustworthy, talkative, and mean-spirited. These are not qualities that any lawyer, let alone a young lawyer just starting out in the industry, wants to be associated with. If you find yourself in a situation where people are gossiping or talking negatively about another person, safeguard your reputation and remove yourself without delay.

Be Organized and On Top of Cases

Although your reputation at work is but one aspect of your complete reputation, it is nonetheless important and should not be discounted. Of course, how you treat others at work (and in public) drastically affects your reputation. Being rude and condescending to junior lawyers, paralegals, or assistants only reflects negatively on you and creates an atmosphere where people want to avoid you. That's certainly not helpful in a profession based on relationships. Equally as important is your work ethic. Are you thorough and detail-oriented or constantly fielding follow-up questions on issues you should have caught? If the latter, it may be time to re-evaluate your approach because if the trend continues, your reputation will suffer.

Get Involved and Stay Involved

Developing a good reputation takes effort and cannot be fully achieved by simply doing your work and going home. Getting actively involved at work and in your community increases your exposure and, in turn, will have a positive influence on your reputation if you show meaningful interest. The more contacts you make (at work or in public), the more opportunities you have to prove yourself and create a good reputation. So go to that work event and mingle for an hour or two (hopefully there is free food and drinks), join a committee, write an article with a partner you've been wanting to get to know better, participate in pro bono activities, or do something for the community near home.

You have expended so much time reading cases, studying for exams, finding a job, and now you are finally a practicing lawyer. Don't undo all of that effort by creating a negative reputation for yourself. Be smart and consider your actions and treatment of others. Doing so at this stage will undoubtedly benefit you later when you have solidified your good reputation.

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