

BUILDING STRONG PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SPITE OF YOUR CAREER

By Eleanor Southers



When I started this article, I said to myself, “this is going to be a difficult piece to write as I have such a high regard and respect for attorneys.” On the other hand, if I can reach one or two attorneys who might recognize themselves and really wish to strengthen their personal relationships, an honest narrative, although hard, would be worthwhile.

As you can probably infer from the title, the assumption is that the skills acquired as a lawyer can hinder meaningful relationships. So, here goes. Let’s first look at the unique traits that lawyers get exposed to in law schools. They are told that they are the smartest people in the world. When that was said in my law school, I remember thinking that the teacher must be wrong because I tried but really didn’t know anything about quantum mechanics, and I didn’t ever want to know anything about it. On the other hand, I was flattered. We also were told that attorneys think differently than the layperson. We were going to be taught to think in terms of identifying problems and solving problems, which will make us better people. We were going to be taught that the world will hold us to a higher standard and that we will even have to disclose our errors to our clients and be punished. It was hinted that we could make a lot of money as lawyers, but we might also have to change our mind-set to become “Master of the Universe.”

Law school produces a lot of terror in most students. In some cases that terror can produce paranoia. I remember one time when we were assigned a case that could only be found in one book in the law library. Face it, this was 40 years ago, before computers, Internet, or mobile phones! One young man apparently went to the law library and tore out the case we had to look up and destroyed it so none of the rest of us could be prepared. I’m sure you have your own law school horror stories. The competition is fierce. You learn to live with it and try to keep your sanity at the same time.

After putting in years studying the law, you are faced with the dreaded *bar exam*. It is meant to fail a good percentage and does. Even good students who would make fine attorneys must pick themselves up and, shamefaced, take the test again. Just another stressor in an attorney’s life.

Then the job search is on. Next you find out that your employer expects you to be aggressive, combative, and *perfect*. If, on top of everything, you have a big student loan, the pressure can become overwhelming. You learned some of the ways to cope while in law school. You had to be aggressive and competitive and work long hours to get a decent grade. Now you are faced with long hours and being competitive and aggressive to get a decent salary while scared that you don’t know enough to get through all of it.

MINDFULNESS IN ACTION

Being more aware of our competitive tendencies can foster a closer sense of connectedness with others.

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All the while you are doing this, you are acquiring traits to survive in your environment. Unfortunately, many of these qualities come at a cost. Lost is the time to nurture a support group and to seek personal close relationships. Most of your relationships are with your fellow attorneys at your office, which, if the firm culture is destructive, can leave you feeling betrayed and used. Because you are dealing with both stress and overwork, you may rely on alcohol or drugs or worse to feel even a little bit better. This then leads you down a path where survival is based on only having the fortitude to show up at work and try to please your boss or your clients.

Having to win all the time is good in the courtroom but destructive in relationships.



This is even true for the solo practitioner. After going through the ordeal of establishing a solo practice, the stress mounts as you have to do many jobs not even related to the law. You become chief janitor, marketer, accountant, HR person, and several other duties requiring a lot of time away from the actual practice of law. You sometimes become deeply attached to your clients. You want to be their advocate and solve their problems and be their *hero*. Sometimes you just can't do all that. Talk about stress!

At this point, you might say that none of this pertains to you because you have a family and friends and you *are* a hero. Let's go one step further and analyze what other behaviors you may have developed as a lawyer that could be incompatible with establishing close personal relationships, and that maybe you are living in denial about them.

Be brave and see if any of these apply:

- Inability to admit wrongdoing or take responsibility for bad behavior

- Undue pessimism
- Black-and-white thinking
- Winning for the sake of winning and at all costs
- An unhelpful competitive and argumentative conversation style
- Perfectionism
- Keeping score
- Acting within the letter of the law but not the spirit
- Intrusive inquiry into fact and a cross-examination style of seeking information
- Over-reliance on facts with not enough attention paid to emotions

- Problem solving rather than listening
- Wanting everything done immediately
- Short temper with staff, family, and yourself
- Inability to relax
- Ignoring self-care
- Accused of being self-centered
- Unable to take time for anything but work

Some of these do not come directly from championing the traits required as a lawyer, but many are set up by what you perceive to be the fierce requirements demanded by the practice of law.

If you are really brave, run this by a friend or spouse or even grown child and see if they recognize any of these behaviors in you.

What are you going to do if you decide to develop the ability to have more personal intimate relationships that are strong and ongoing? Let's face it: You don't want to be old, alone, bored, and have age-related osteoarthritis, hearing

loss, needing cataract surgery, and all the other old-people diseases and have to take an Uber to your appointments. Having a caring, supportive group of people who admire and respect you and want to be with you in your times of need is much better.

Starting with this understanding that many lawyer traits discourage the participation in close relationships, let's start identifying what actions and qualities are necessary to support human connections.

- **Problem:** Having no time to spend with desired company. When all your time is spent at the office and the only conversation or interest is your practice, why would someone value you as a friend or lover?
- **Possible solution:** Good time management. If the decision is that you want to take part in a relationship, you must allocate the time *in your calendar*. In this way, you can make a deal with yourself that there is time in your life for a connection and that other work will get done. If you don't know what I'm talking about, take a class. It may seem stilted, but you will also have to find two or three things that you are interested in outside the law, and get ready to share that interest. Most importantly, you need to learn to listen to the other person and be genuinely interested in him or her, even if it is a child.
- **Problem:** Always being *right*. If you can pick out where the opponent is wrong, then you can be right. This is important when you are working as an advocate, but totally unimportant when you are dealing with regular people!
- **Possible solution:** Why is being right seemingly so vital in the practice of law? Because it will help you win, and winning is good for your ego and really bad for the other guy's. Unfortunately, having the ridiculous criteria of winning

in a relationship is destructive. Crushing the other person's ego is exactly the wrong approach if you want to establish the warm feeling that comes from having a human being admire you. The answer is to respect the people you are talking to by listening to their view and to respond by giving back what they said so that they understand you heard them. Then you can quietly and kindly respond with your thoughts. Neither wins the argument because there is no argument. This is not the courtroom.

- **Problem:** Accusations of being self-centered. Based on the fact that you have been told since law school that you are the most brilliant high achiever who ever graced the earth, it can be a comedown to find you are just another “Bozo on the bus of life,” as one of my teachers once said.
- **Possible solution:** Take a close look: Do you talk most of the time about yourself and your achievements? Then look to see if you are often bored when listening to laypeople talk about themselves. You love to share “war stories” with fellow lawyers and are surprised that lay friends and lovers are uninterested. What is really important in your life? If you look at your family to decide who is the most important person, would you always say yourself? In truth, if you have children, they are the most important beings in your family because they are still forming and can't do that without adult help. Actually, everyone in your family and your close friends are valuable, including you. Recognizing this fact, along with the knowledge that life is about having a tribe that supports you and that you contribute to, will make you happier and more

contented. If you want more confirmation about this, take a look at *The Happy Lawyer: Making a Good Life in the Law* by Nancy Levit and Douglas O. Linder (Oxford University Press, 2010).

With all this in mind, take a look at your personal lifestyle. Have you planned for the future? Does that future hold more than just making partner or becoming a billionaire? Is a family included? Do you want to have children? I recently heard something truly heart-wrenching while listening to the radio in my car. It was Valentine's Day, and a grade school teacher asked the children what love meant for them. A little boy piped up

Love requires going beyond the “survival” mode you adopted in law school.

and said, “Love is when my Daddy comes home from work.” I thought about all the attorneys and other compulsive fathers who find work much more important than coming home to their children. Love is shown by the time and interest you take in other people. Love can be a two-way street but requires commitment and courage to extend yourself beyond the “survival” methods that many lawyers allow to follow them into life after law school.

We might also talk a little about compulsive, obsessive behaviors at this point. Many attorneys have developed

compulsive habits to help them get through their life. This means creating the fear that if they do not perform certain acts, they will not only fail but will be annihilated. They don't see any way out of not performing certain rituals over and over again. Maybe they're not washing their hands a hundred times a day, but compulsion is also not having the ability to stop working at a reasonable hour and start relating to a different life. *The relevant point is to realize that the fear is based on a false premise.* Without the ability to see alternatives, the harassed lawyer is doomed to keep repeating his or her compulsions. That fear can only be abated by first identifying it and then challenging the thinking. If an attorney can arrange to take every Friday afternoon off and see that the world continues to function, then he or she has started an important journey. I know of attorneys who miss really important appointments with the dentist or doctors because they have such fear of taking a couple of hours or even a half-day to take care of themselves. Nothing seems more important than their career, and they fear the reprisal that they will get from their colleagues and boss.

Finally, in this journey of introspection, you may come to the conclusion that you must make substantial changes to your life. This may mean changing your career path to include a practice that has a culture of kindness, reason, and balance. This may mean giving up the desire to be “Master of the Universe” and a billionaire. This need not include a meaningless career or one that doesn't make enough money to be comfortable, but it does take guts and courage to make these changes. You could start just by taking this Friday afternoon off, shutting off your phone, and seeing if your world falls apart. Take it from me . . . it's not likely. ■



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