

By Rebecca A. Delfino

## Practice Tips from My Grandmother

### Career success will often depend not only on technical skills but also on manners

There is no doubt that all of us want legal careers that are satisfying and successful and know that a rewarding career is built upon a command of the law and the ability to marshal facts and communicate clearly. However, beyond mastery of effective legal writing, negotiating, and advocacy, career success and satisfaction rest upon many simple practices that lawyers and nonlawyers are able to employ every day. We would do well to remember, in our daily practice of law, a few lessons that we may have learned from our grandmothers.

For example, my grandmother counseled me to pay attention to the big picture and to take things in stride. While careers may seem long, they are not. Your job is just one part of your life. Thus it is wise to develop a thick skin early in your career and to take nothing about work too personally. Some lawyers burden themselves by basing their identity only on their careers. Admittedly, a career in the law can be extremely demanding of a person's time and mental and emotional energy. Moreover, becoming an attorney is the result of many years of hard work and often substantial personal sacrifice. As a result, attorneys may derive their entire self-worth from their jobs. Over-identification with their work invariably causes them to take that work far too personally.

Attorneys who belong to this category tend to overreact to victories and losses at work. However, you are more than a lawyer. How well you perform your job and how much money you earn as an attorney are not the only measures of your success. A well-adjusted and healthy family, meaningful friendships, and interesting and fulfilling activities outside the office also bring success and happiness. In fact, achieving a balance between your work and personal life will most likely bring the greatest feeling of fulfillment. It is simply good career policy to find time for family, friends, and endeavors that are not related to the law.

#### Do Not Bring It Home

As a corollary to keeping things in proper perspective and taking one's job not personally but as just one part of one's life, my grandmother taught me that there is more to learn from losses than wins. While it is certainly important to know what strategy and arguments are key to a particular victory, far more may be learned from failure. Losses should help to formulate the future. No one wants to make the same mistake twice, so losses often receive closer scrutiny and a more meticulous review than wins. In addition, beyond the obvious case-specific, strategic, and substantive lessons, losses teach humility and grace—qualities that are lacking in some lawyers. One should accept, rather than fear and loathe, failures and losses as excellent learning opportunities.

Grandmothers generally are sticklers for manners. One does not forget to say "please" and "thank you" in front of grandma. It is amazing, therefore, to see the overwhelming lack of civility displayed in our profession. Nearly everyone has encountered a lawyer (sometimes even the managing partner of a law firm) who can charm a jury, a judge, and a court clerk and yet is shockingly rude to office colleagues, support staff, and opposing counsel. Such behavior is both arrogant and ignorant. People, whether they are other lawyers assigned to the case or the ones who make the photocopies, will work harder if they are treated with respect and dignity. Attorneys who often compare their achievements to those of others may find it too easy to forget that we are all human beings. Moreover, from a strategic standpoint, kindness toward all, especially opposing counsel, takes little effort and is completely disarming. Civility and manners are contagious; they generate goodwill.

#### Avoid Gossip

My grandmother also taught me that loose lips sink ships. Many legal careers have been sunk by office gossip—especially the careers of those who gossip. It is more fun to engage in gossip about who is kissing whom in the office elevator than it is to draft responses to boilerplate interrogatories. However, gossiping should be avoided because it is mean-spirited and impolitic. Gossips are viewed as untrustworthy, immature, and injudicious—traits that can sound a death knell for any promising young legal career. Keep speculations about your coworkers and bosses to yourself—and barring that, share the titillating news only with those with whom you do not work, for example a significant other or friend.

Not gossiping is one matter; not becoming the subject of office gossip is another. This goal, which any grandmother may be expected to endorse, can be achieved by keeping your private life separate from the office. Do not date your officemates. No matter how attractive a colleague may appear while doing document review at two o'clock in the morning, do not mix business with pleasure. Work is work, and free time is free time. If you have no choice but to view the office as a potential dating pool because even the concept of free time does not exist in your legal career, then you may want to consider ways of finding another job.



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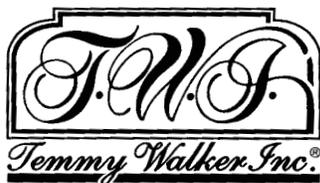
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Grandmother's advice about minding your teachers still applies in adulthood. Career mentors are wonderful. One can learn a great deal about how to survive and thrive as a lawyer from a senior attorney in the same practice area. In addition, a mentor can play a key role in helping a less seasoned lawyer gain valuable practice experience and advance in his or her career. Every lawyer should seek out a teacher. However, mentors must be chosen carefully, with an understanding of what can and cannot be gained from the relationship.

### Two Types of Mentors

If your mentor is someone you report to or is directly above you in the chain of responsibility, you should keep the relationship formal and businesslike. Do your best work possible for the mentor-boss. Do not be lulled into thinking this person will always be your friend or is always on your side—no matter what the mentor-boss says to the contrary. Do not share any insecurities you may have regarding your job performance with a boss, and by all means do not make your mentor-boss your drinking buddy. Remember, your work will be a reflection on the mentor-boss, and he or she is always accountable to someone else—such as other partners or the client—for your performance. Consequently, you should learn all you can from the mentor-boss, but you should also keep the relationship at arm's length.

A boss is not the only career teacher from whom one can learn. Another valuable mentor relationship should be cultivated with a mentor-buddy. This type of mentor is a lawyer with three to four years more experience as a lawyer than you. In contrast to the mentor-boss, the mentor-buddy should be someone who does not directly supervise your work but nonetheless has sufficient experience to provide you with moral support, guidance, exemplars of work product, and insight about life in the office and how to practice law. Because the mentor-buddy does not have to judge your job performance, you can develop a more informal relationship with this person; you will enjoy the freedom to share ideas, thoughts, and workplace concerns with the mentor-buddy. Informal mentors such as these are extremely helpful and are often a key factor in helping a person survive in a particular job.

For the most part, these rules are self-evident, especially to educated and sensible young professionals. Sometimes, however, in the rush to get a brief out the door, return a client's call, or make it to court on time, we can forget—or worse yet, neglect—these basic life skills that our grandmothers taught by word and deed. ■