

What Can 'Better Call Saul' Teach Us About the Importance of a Lawyer's Reputation?

Since the first season of *Better Call Saul*, audiences have watched the critically acclaimed transformation of low-level elder law practitioner Jimmy McGill into Saul Goodman: the rule-breaking, money-hungry, comically criminal attorney introduced in *Breaking Bad*.

To quickly recap, Jimmy/Saul has had his license suspended due to criminal charges he faced for breaking into his older (now deceased) more successful brother Chuck's home to destroy audio recordings of Jimmy confessing to manufacturing evidence. A large portion of season four focuses on Jimmy's attempt to carve out an existence that will simultaneously keep him afloat while also providing a smooth transition back into the practice of law, if and when reinstated.

For better or worse, your reputation is the easiest thing to create

The largest hurdle for Jimmy's reinstatement though, is that he has completely soiled his reputation. To be fair, it's not as if it was stellar to begin with. "Slippin' Jimmy" has a history of relying on shortcuts and scams to get to this point in his life. As an attorney, he continued to find dishonest ways to achieve his goals. After the situation with his brother Chuck (who was a prestigious attorney for most his life), Jimmy created a negative reputation with the bar association as well.

Now he has to figure out how to rehabilitate it.

If you aren't familiar with the show, at least know this: Michael "Mike" Ehrmantraut's contemporaneous storyline is one of the best aspects of *Better Call Saul* as a series. Season four represents the series' best portrayal of Mike and Jimmy's paths on the same parallel. It's been some time since Mike and Jimmy crossed ways, but their respective character arcs are trending in the same direction.

At this point, ex-crooked-cop/virtuous criminal-fixer Mike has made a positive reputation for himself with Gustavo "Gus" Fring, one of the largest methamphetamine kingpins in the U.S. He has become a trusted confidant and do-it-all handyman. However, confidentiality has been compromised on a project Gus put Mike in charge of, and Mike's reputation with Gus has taken a significant hit as a result.

Like Jimmy, Mike needs to find a way to rehabilitate

Many people don't realize—or simply don't appreciate—that their reputation means everything in most facets of life. Whether professionally or personally, the way others view you has a direct impact on how your future unfolds. Think about it: Nobody lives in a vacuum. Unless you

are a hermit surviving in a cave, there will always be other people in your life who interact with you based on the level of trust, reliability, hard work, and resilience you bring to the table.

This is especially true for attorneys. We operate in an extreme position of trust. In a sometimes-volatile legal market, one of the few safeguards we can count on is the goodwill we've earned and the reputations we've developed. As such, it's up to each individual practitioner to do the simple things to create a positive reputation. Be respectful of your clients and peers. Be diligent in your communication. Take pride in your work. Be transparent in everything you do. Be honest.

If you don't, everyone will eventually find out. You'll get a bad reputation. Attorneys operate in a small ecosystem. Sure, different markets have differing amounts of practicing lawyers. Still, one thing stays consistent: Attorneys make up only a small portion of any population. Many attorneys profit and fail largely based on their reputation. Depending on the size of your market, one wrong move could ruin your reputation forever.

Your reputation is the most difficult thing to rehabilitate

Throughout the series, Jimmy has committed plenty of wrong moves, and rehabilitating his image will take quite a bit of work. When he initially appears before a panel for reinstatement, the three members seem visibly impressed by his presentation. He feigns interest in current legal developments, his future plans and everything else he thinks the decision-makers want to hear. However, the panel ultimately finds him disingenuous. He never once mentions his brother or the details that resulted in his suspension.

The panel ultimately denies Jimmy's application. The denial sets in motion a string of events designed by fellow attorney/on-again-off-again love interest Kim Wexler to help rehabilitate Jimmy's reputation to support an appeal. With the completion of each task though, Jimmy becomes more and more disenchanted by the lack of an immediate payoff. He is spotted at his brother's grave in a series of staged appearances. He donates funds to dedicate a law library in his brother's name. But all of these actions come from a place of disingenuousness.

As a last-ditch effort, he assists in providing scholarships to a few select high school students. When one of the applicants is denied due to a previous shoplifting charge from her youth, Jimmy tries to lobby for her. He artfully argues that one bad choice shouldn't taint someone forever, but his comments land on deaf ears. He returns home to find Kim preparing his presentation to the bar, but Jimmy continues to complain and wallow noting that, no matter what he says in his personal statement to the appeal board, he's still going to be "that guy."

On Mike's side of the story, he sees a way to fix his reputation. He becomes personally invested and sets his sights on achieving his goal. He takes the lead on trying to rectify the potential security breach currently causing his problems. He doesn't wallow in his pity like Jimmy. Instead, he is willing to get his hands dirty in his attempt to prove his bad judgment call will not jeopardize the current criminal enterprise he is involved in. While Jimmy is leaning on Kim for help, Mike knows that his reputation—and potentially his life—are on the line, and he is not the type to rely on others to fix his problems for him.

Taking responsibility goes a long way

Mike knows and appreciates a very important fact of life: Reputation is personal. Sure, there are those who get by on their family name alone. At the end of the day though, a name is nothing by itself. It can only take you so far. At some point, you will be judged solely on your own merits.

That point circles back to Jimmy as he follows Kim's lead in their attempt to appeal the panel's decision. Kim has worked to help Jimmy put a plan in motion to show the bar association that he is fit for reinstatement. She is obviously the driving force behind the efforts, as Jimmy appears more comfortable complaining about his consistent failures.

Prior to his appeal hearing, Jimmy decides he will read Chuck's final letter to him in lieu of giving a personal statement. He hopes that the letter will provide the emotional hook he needs to seal his reinstatement. Once again, he is relying on someone else to fix his reputation. Kim offers more guidance though, explaining "it's not just the words, though ... you know? It's how you read them."

It's an apt analogy. Relying on others to fix our problems never results in a lasting resolution. I found it interesting that such an insightful remark came from the mouth of one of Jimmy's biggest enablers. Perhaps her underlying push for the personal wasn't as intentional as I imagine. Perhaps she's trying to help Jimmy in more ways than one.

After all, Kim has been in Jimmy's corner since the beginning. She has consistently and competently fixed many of his problems over the previous seasons. As a result, Jimmy has forgotten a very valuable lesson—if he ever learned it at all: If someone is always there to catch you, you're bound to keep falling from your perch. Sometimes it's the pain of hitting the ground that reminds you to hold on tight.

Jimmy eventually strays from reading the letter to the appeal board, instead relying on dishonesty once again. By his own account, he knew the letter wasn't going to be enough to tug at the board's heartstrings as soon as he started reading it. Consequently, he goes off script, free-flowing his lies "like improv or jazz ..." The board ends up reinstating Jimmy, and even though his performance appears genuine, the insincerity is completely evident in his post-presentation celebration.

Grabbing the bull by the horns

Mike utilizes a different method. He accepts that his personal decisions have created his current situation. He takes the conflict head-on, and he personally fixes the problem. Mike's decision is much more life-altering than Jimmy's, but the contrast is still there. He truly understands his reputation has been put into question, and he is the only person who can really restore it.

In this sense, Mike takes the correct approach to rehabilitation—minus the criminal means he has to employ. He grabs the bull by the horns. He controls the situation to ensure it is rectified

in a way he deems correct. He is straightforward in his approach. He doesn't try to mislead anyone or use any deception to achieve his goal. He is completely honest with the individual he has to eliminate, potentially to a fault. Once the task is complete, it's clear Mike has regained his reputation, and the way in which he succeeds suggests he will maintain the same for some time to come.

Jimmy, on the other hand, takes the wrong approach to regaining his reputation. He relies on Kim to fix his problems and keep him on track. He falls back on his dishonest and manipulative ways. The audience is left with the impression this won't be the end to Jimmy's struggles with his reputation, and he's probably completely fine with that.

When all the dust settles, how will you be perceived by your family, friends, co-workers and clients? Is your reputation where you want it, or should you take a step back and try to fix it?

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