

Five Traits of Great Lawyers

What makes a great lawyer? Is it intelligence, good people skills, effective writing? Of course, we must have a certain level of intelligence and motivation, along with experience and opportunities. But the truth is, the traits that transform a good lawyer into a great lawyer may not be the ones you think.

Here are five traits that make a lawyer — or any person — stand above the rest. Cultivating these traits provides the opportunity to really understand the issues and offer effective solutions.

1. Compassion

Compassion is an emotional response whereby one perceives another's problem and authentically, genuinely wants to help resolve the problem. This is part of what lawyers do: People come to us with their problems, or to avoid future problems, and we help resolve or avoid the issues, whichever the case may be. If you practice business law, tax law or in any area that is not particularly "emotional," you may not think that compassion is important to your practice. But it is. The compassionate lawyer focuses on how others feel and is accepting of their perspective, whether or not he ultimately agrees with it.

Compassion is the foundation for good people skills. Without compassion, you cannot put yourself in your client's shoes or fully understand the issues your client faces. Without compassion, you cannot understand your adversary's position, anticipate what she will do, and take pre-emptive steps to benefit your client. Without it, you cannot provide the best solutions.

2. Ability to Listen

Effective communication skills are essential to good lawyering. One of the most important aspects of communication is listening. Of course, what we say, how we say it and when we say it are important. But we can only do it right if we listen first. Listen to your clients. Listen to your adversaries, your colleagues and the judges. As lawyers, we must take in much information, analyze and synthesize it, and exercise good judgment to provide advice to our clients. It starts with listening.

3. Assertiveness, Not Aggressiveness

I often hear people say, “She’s not aggressive enough to be an effective lawyer.” That’s not right. You don’t need to be aggressive — though you must be assertive. Assertive lawyers state their opinions and make themselves heard, while remaining respectful of others. Aggressive lawyers attack or ignore others’ opinions in favor of their own.

Much like those who lack compassion, overly aggressive lawyers cannot understand another’s position when it varies from their client’s position. That makes them ineffective at understanding the problem and thus incapable of providing an effective solution. Even more detrimental, overly aggressive lawyers act without respect for others. This damages interpersonal relationships, ultimately leading to an uncooperative environment that makes resolution or agreement impossible.

4. Creativity

We need to be creative to find real solutions to the issues our clients face. Each matter is unique; each client must be handled differently, and each solution carefully crafted. While on the whole we lawyers are a rather risk-averse group, we must learn to think outside the box. The best way to create unique solutions is to approach each situation with compassionate listening, which enables you to really understand the issues and what the client and the adversary need. That level of understanding can lead to long-lasting solutions that work for all interested parties. Stalemates often arise when opposing counsel fails to approach the matter with compassionate listening and, instead, becomes unnecessarily aggressive. Don’t be that deal-breaker.

5. Perseverance

Success is achieved with perseverance. We must keep working, keep trying and keep going. We must be able to walk away when things are not working, take a break and come back fresh and ready to “fight,” negotiate or whatever the matter requires.

Now go out there and be great!

By Jamie Spannhake