

A Game Plan for Survival

With vivid memories of a rough start, one leader offers five rules for beginners.



BY PAMELA V. ROTHENBERG

How can it be that I have been out of law school for more than 20 years? I feel like it was just last week that I was starting my position as a first-year associate at a major Chicago law firm.

Actually, although my three daughters are now ages 13½, 11, and 2½, I also feel like it was just yesterday that I was in labor and giving birth to my oldest beauty. As I am recollecting all of these special moments, I am thinking that perhaps having an exceptionally accurate memory is not always such a good thing. While I cherish my vivid images of childbearing (a labor of love), I certainly could stand to repress my still crystal clear recollections of those initial days of “associate-hood” at a private law firm (where no love was lost).

In those days, most associates began their legal careers immediately after law school graduation and before they took the bar. So, from the inception of our legal careers, we were twisted with “pre-bar” stress and we walked in continuous fear of the possible pending public humiliation of receiving the news that we failed the bar while we were literally at work.

On my very first day (and within the very first few hours) at the law firm, all of the new first-year associates were herded into a conference room. The stated purpose of the meeting was to provide us with some “tips for success” from one of the superstar lawyers that the law firm had designated to serve as our mentor.

“Rule Number One: You have one job and only one job right now at this firm. You MUST pass the bar.” “Rule Number Two: Bill A LOT of time. Bill every minute of every waking hour of every day—even while you are taking a bathroom break or are in the shower and simply thinking about a client or matter—BILL, BILL, BILL.” His list continued on in a similar tone and with similar substance (or lack thereof).

Of course, what our mentor failed to mention, among many other things, was how we were expected to bill continuously, and, if necessary, never go home should that be required, and yet still have time to study for the bar. He also failed to share any insights whatsoever about how to cope with the difficulties generally presented by private practice and specifically associated with being a first-year associate. In retrospect, I think the most valuable things he imparted to us were his passing words of good luck.

I am one of those lawyers who does not subscribe to the fraternity “pledge” mentality. I do not approach things from the perspective of “I went through it and, therefore, so should you.” Rather, I view my role as one of helping my associates, my daughters, and for that matter, anyone who crosses my path, to completely avoid going through challenges I have previously faced (or, at the very least, minimizing the difficulties associated with those challenges, if the challenges themselves are unavoidable).

THE RULES

In that vein, I share with you my top five rules (a.k.a. suggestions) about how to excel or at the very least survive your first year as an associate at a private firm.

Rule 1: ALWAYS do good work. Your work is the initial thing that everyone will see about you when you start out as a new associate. Your work is most certainly one of the only things everyone will remember about you as a new associate. Take painstaking efforts to produce your absolute best work product on every matter and for every assignment. Every project counts. None is more important than another (no matter whether a senior partner or a junior associate has given you the assignment). Take the time you need to take to achieve an outstanding result for every task you undertake. If you do not have enough time to do your best work, let the person for whom you are doing the assignment know that you need more time. If

you produce stellar work product, you will be starting off on a virtually bulletproof path.

Rule 2: Be a problem solver, not just a problem spotter. The transition from being a student in law school into an associate at a law firm presents numerous trials and tribulations. One of the less obvious relates to the fact that in law school, your brain is trained to be an “issue spotter,” while at a law firm, to be most effective, you need to morph into a lawyer who resolves the issues you only recently learned to spot.

Whenever you stumble into a legal problem that seems insoluble, DO NOT go to your supervising partner or senior associate and tell them you have hit a roadblock UNLESS you are also prepared to provide some suggestions about how you might overcome the problem. Even if your suggestions are not used, you will stand out as a shining star who intuitively applies critical thinking to the practice of law.

Rule 3: Take the initiative. Be the leader that you are (remember your stellar résumé that got you this job in the first place?) and take control of your situation. Do not just accomplish an assignment as given, but service your clients beyond the transaction or matter at hand. Act as if you OWN your career and approach your work as if you are already an owner (i.e., partner) of your firm. Think early and often about how to turn yourself into a thought leader who pushes the firm and the profession forward. Put in the work (the extra hours) that is necessary to distinguish yourself. Law firms need strategic thinkers. Give thought early in your career about how to set yourself apart by providing this value.

Rule 4: Build meaningful relationships. Be positive. Reach out. Try to connect. Do not sit and wait for someone to come to you, to begin a mentoring relationship or to otherwise engage with you. Everyone appreciates being approached by junior attorneys with energy and initiative and who are desirous of building connections. Senior law firm players enjoy being around upbeat and positive associates. Instead of relying on e-mails or voicemails, do the human thing and try to communicate live and in person or on the phone. Developing and sustaining close friendships

with your firm’s clients, partners, associates, and staff are not only the foundations for a successful legal career, but are also the building blocks for enjoying a meaningful and fulfilling experience each and every day you are at work.

Rule 5: Chin up. NEVER let the bad apples get you down. If you are facing a difficult situation, such as working with a non-supportive lawyer (or one who DOES subscribe to the frat pledge mentality), just grit your teeth, do your best, and build bridges around him or her. No one says or believes that working at a law firm is easy. It is not. That’s why they call it work. Find other outlets at the firm or elsewhere to help balance the negativity that the difficult person presents. Remember that difficult people exist everywhere (not only at your law firm, although it might seem that way). Just concentrate on the positives and build “work-arounds” that enable you to cope with the challenges that the negatives present.

Great lawyers are zealous advocates. They continuously and consistently serve their clients’ needs with laser-like energy and focus. Great lawyers also make significant contributions of talent and leadership to their law firms and their communities. To sustain that level of commitment and service and those contributions of talent and leadership, great lawyers require a solid foundation and strong support.

As a first year associate, you have an opportunity within your firm to begin to both establish these essential underpinnings and build critical sources of support from those around you. Give thought to how to integrate yourself into the fabric of your firm. Give thought about how to not only be a zealous advocate, but also how to find one for yourself within your firm. There are many of us out there and we are standing by ready to help you.

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