

Nebraska

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Young Lawyers Section

Submissions to the Young Lawyers Section Page from young attorneys across the state are always welcome. If you're interested in writing, please contact Jamie Hermanson, Editor, at jcbermanson@gmail.com.

To All Young Lawyers: Be Willing

by Lindsay Belmont

Are you willing? Are you willing to grow professionally and personally? Are you willing to let in support? Are you willing to question yourself? Are you willing to confront what scares you? Well, are you?

These questions have been posed to me more times than I can count in my first year as an associate attorney with Koenig|Dunne. And every time I'm asked whether I'm willing, how could I say no? As a young lawyer, I am eager to learn all that I can to be an excellent family law attorney. With that eagerness comes willingness. You have to be willing in order to achieve what you want. Willingness requires an open mind to get you started on your path.

In law school, we're taught how to read court opinions, write briefs, analyze facts, and apply the law. Being a lawyer, however, is so much more than that. And being a lawyer in a firm culture where growth mindsets are encouraged and willingness is required has helped me create the vision for where I want my legal career to go. So, after a year of ups and downs, successes and shortcomings, here's some advice for the young lawyer:

Grow professionally and personally. This sounds easy, but I've found that it's essential to be intentional in *how* you want to grow as a professional and as a person. Decide who you want to be. Make connections. Take advantage of what our community has to offer. Attend professional events. You never know who you'll meet at a seminar or a barbecue. Reflect upon who you are in each role. You may be surprised to see how your professional growth informs your personal relationships. I've learned skills in the office and courtroom that filter into how I am in my personal life. It has helped me grow.

Let in support. I am fortunate enough to be part of legal team at Koenig|Dunne that is the definition of support. If you need help, ask for it. If you're unsure how best to present your case at trial, set a strategizing session with your co-workers. Not only will you feel supported, but your co-workers will be grateful that you allowed them to be a contribution to you. You are all on the same team. Your success is their success.

Question yourself. This one is hard. Were you the student who always over-prepared for exams? Always stressed yourself out more than necessary? Me too. And I thought that's what made me successful – after all, my anxiety-filled studying habits

resulted in good grades. It wasn't before long that I was asked whether I was willing to question this closely-held belief. And sure enough, it has changed everything. I now know that my greatest contribution does not come from spending unnecessary hours memorizing every detail of the case. Instead, it comes from using my time effectively and knowing that I am capable of getting the job done without oversteering. And this learning has led me to experience success. In other words, always be willing to question yourself.

Confront what scares you. Whether it's going to the courtroom, briefing a complex issue, or dealing with a difficult opposing counsel or client, don't avoid it. Confront it head-on, with the belief that you can do it. After all, self-doubt is a choice. Prove yourself wrong. It'll be worth it.

So, are you willing? Good. Now go *do*.

Lindsay Belmont is an attorney at Koenig|Dunne, PC, LLO and practices primarily in the area of family law. She is the current treasurer for the Family Law Section of the Nebraska State Bar Association and a member of the Omaha Bar Association. You can find more information about Lindsay's practice and contact her at www.koenigdunne.com.



Mark as Unread: A Strategy to Maintain Sanity and Client Control

by Hannah Sommers

I keep my phone on silent. I don't even let it vibrate.

There is something satisfying about seeing it light up—knowing someone wants my attention—and knowing I get to decide whether the timing is right for me to engage. Of course, there are calls and messages I would never ignore, but I'm talking about the ones I allow myself to ignore (momentarily) with great, pat-myself-on-the-back sort of satisfaction for delaying the excitement of conversing about the latest development in the drama that is divorce. I put those calls and messages on my mental back burner because I know it will be better for *both* of us if I take time to put some thought into my communication. Lawyering is not a race—but it is a competition—one with a lot of players, all of whom have a lot on the line. I find that I'm best at the game when I make myself the M.V.P.

I get a lot of emails as a divorce and family lawyer. That is not meant to be a brag or a complaint. I can honestly say I love it, even if I'm not constantly replying to each message I receive.

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By taking some time to plan out my response, I'm not playing "hard to get," or exercising my authority. Instead, I am giving my brain a sneak peek of what I need to think about for that client for that day, and I internally organize what I need to do to give that person what they need.

If I responded to each email automatically, I would not be doing the service I am paid to do: educate, counsel, and represent. I have learned that with some clients, the faster I respond to some of the more trivial emails, the quicker I enter the ~~Danger Zone~~ "friend zone." It's a strange territory when the person on the other end so greatly enjoys your company by electronic correspondence that they want to clog up your inbox with one sentence curiosities, challenging you on a regular basis to respond to them with the same efficiency in one organized congruous email. Sometimes, that is just not possible.

In order to correctly answer some clients' questions, my email response is full of citations to case law and the Nebraska Revised Statutes. Other times, the answer is one word, like "No," or one phrase, like "Stop talking to her." It took me a while to get used to being so cold and straight to the point with some of my more sympathetic clients, however, I learned a few things early on in practice: 1) clients don't read emails with the same attention I do; 2) they rarely do what they are told the first time; and 3) if there are fewer words to read, the words are harder to ignore.

I thought I would miss the level of daily social interaction I found as a news reporter, but as it turns out, I am much more engaged and involved in peoples' stories as their attorney than I ever was as the reporter. As the lawyer, I'm trusted with knowing the deepest secrets and the juiciest scandals, and as exciting as that seems, it also draws an unhealthy level of attachment to people you know are confiding in you, and maybe only you. That is the greatest responsibility of the job, and some clients will rely on your availability to your detriment. When that starts to happen, I do a couple things to keep the situation in check:

1. **I consolidate.** I send one email covering each question or comment in the client's chain of emails. If there is too much to go over, I email the outline and any documents the client needs to review, and then I schedule a call or meeting.

2. **I manage expectations.** People going through divorce have the desire to "win." I make sure it is clear no one "wins" or "loses" in divorce. I tell clients the way to feel any grain of satisfaction in signing a settlement proposal, or going through with a trial, is to stay organized and do their part to familiarize themselves to the best of their ability about their assets and debts. Divorce is easier when thought about and conducted in a businesslike manner.

3. **I communicate.** It is normal to fear the unknown, especially when children are involved. As family lawyers, we hold

the key to calming stressed out parents when they are worried about losing time and control over their children. When it is obvious to me a client is frustrated or offended by the idea of sharing custody and parenting time with the other party, I use real life examples about what to expect, I send them case law that applies to their circumstances, and I make sure to call them or email them back within 24 hours of receiving a call or email from them. Letting the client know you have not forgotten about them goes a long way.

That is my advice for my fellow slightly-obsessive, dedicated, and diehard attorney friends. Now that you know my secret, I hope you find my strategy as fulfilling and effective as I do.

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