

Living Life As An Associate

*If you enjoy and value what you do, and try to be effective,
others will be drawn to you and appreciate you.*

By Dennis Coyne

Perhaps the first piece of advice for an associate is to be wary of advice, especially unsolicited advice. People like me want to be helpful, but the advice we give is only helpful if it suits you. With that in mind, see how the following ideas resonate (or not) with you.

Be Yourself

Many associates seek wholeheartedly to conform to the culture of their workplace. Wittingly or unwittingly, they take on a certain personality or style. Some, in a conscious effort to fit in, aspire to be as malleable as "Play-Doh," shaped by their surroundings (Insert link to The Man Who Would be "Play-Doh" Vol. 3, No. 1)

Living an assumed identity is tiring: it requires vigilance and effort. Just as problematic, others may see you as less than authentic or perhaps even phony. This happened to me when I was a law student and resident advisor in a freshman dorm. Wanting to bond with the young men on the floor, I decided to talk as they did, using their idioms to gain their confidence. After a meeting, one of the freshmen approached me and asked: "Do you speak to your friends the way you spoke to us tonight?" I acknowledged that I didn't. "Then don't speak to us that way, either," he replied-a valuable lesson I never forgot.

As best you can, be true to your values and fulfill your commitments. People will respect you for that. And, if you get lost, or you're not sure who you are, ask an old friend or life-partner-or even your Mom.

At the same time, remain aware of your surroundings. Ask for feedback if you feel confused or uncomfortable, or if someone seems uncomfortable with you or what you've done. Simply ask: "How am I doing?" "How are we doing?" Proceeding thoughtfully and strategically is far more effective than simply assuming an identity or disposition that doesn't suit you.

Seek Mentors

Some law departments assign mentors, but the match is only as good as the fit. Do what you can to make good use of the assignment and learn what the mentor can teach you.

Typically, mentors are volunteers and are not compensated for their time. Ask them why they've agreed to mentor, and what they would like to get out of the mentoring relationship. In turn, be prepared to tell the mentor what you'd like to get out of the relationship. A conversation like this, in which you learn about each other, will help shape the mentoring relationship to be all that it can be.

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Seek informal mentors as well-people with skills or traits that you'd like to have, or who simply interest you. For example, I began my law practice working in a regional government office with four other young attorneys and Bettsy, our paralegal. We didn't know much about her other than that she was much older than we were, and not an attorney. One day, we asked Bettsy to attend a public meeting and report the outcome of a critical vote.

Her report, when she returned from the meeting, included much more than the vote tally: she told us how each person had acted and how they talked, described the general mood in the room, and told us who had emerged as leaders. Hearing her three-dimensional account, we felt as if we were there. She had learned far more at that meeting than any of us would have.

I wanted to be able to read people and situations as well as Bettsy, and to become as effective as she was. Over the next few years, I began observing her in various circumstances, asked her to collaborate with me on important projects, and sought her advice in developing strategies in high-profile litigation. Others came to value her advice, as well. Years later, she earned a Master's Degree in Urban Studies. And on her 70th birthday, she earned her Ph.D., with distinction, in Psychology. Today, in her 80's, Bettsy continues to teach and write. I am sure that Bettsy has mentored many people; I'm glad that I am one of them.

When I transitioned from government service to private practice, I found another mentor. I was in my mid-40's and didn't know how to establish myself. But I observed Clarence, the founder of the firm where I worked. He greeted his clients warmly and walked them back to his office. He spoke to them considerately and thoughtfully to gain their confidence. A master storyteller, Clarence used narratives to focus the conversation and make abstract ideas compelling and tangible; he also used humor to make a point or to relieve tension in the room.

While I occasionally asked Clarence directly for his advice, most of the time I simply watched as he led the firm and championed the cause of his clients. The fact that our relationship was informal did not diminish its importance.

Being able to identify and learn from mentors is a life-long skill. It is never too early, nor too late, to find them.

Keep Your Eye On The Prize

Early in their careers, many people want to advance at nearly any cost. Advancement is the prize. These people often believe that their tireless service will earn them promotion and recognition. For some that proves to be true. Yet many end up, often on the cusp of partnership, resolving to live their lives differently-only to discover that it's too late to change their ways.

Other workaholics are denied their ultimate prize. They pay a high cost for neglecting their health, their families, and their friends for so many years.

There are still others who prize advancement and work diligently to attract and represent their clients. But they've also been able to balance professional goals with other commitments in their lives. Over the years, they learn to accept and decline work; to take on new clients and refer others. Time and again, they ask themselves: "Today, what is the prize, and what is it worth? Am I being true to my

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commitments? Am I well?" This on-going dialogue with self and others is a means of balancing oneself throughout the inevitable tug-and-pull of a career and competing commitments. It indicates an ability to survive and thrive..

Market Yourself As You Are

Let your marketing efforts emerge from who you really are. Whenever I give this advice, I think of my friend Carl. He began his career as a lawyer knowing that he wanted to do pro bono work in the community and to sit on non-profit boards.

When he volunteered at his alma mater and when he began working with arts organizations, he didn't view this as marketing activity, nor did he do it to bring attention to himself: he did it because he considered it the right thing to do. Over the years, Carl contributed a great deal of time and good counsel to these organizations. His reputation as a kind and generous lawyer grew; not surprisingly, his law practice grew alongside his public service. Carl's genius is that he knew himself, understood his commitment to the profession, followed his interests in education and the arts, and served his clients well.

Like Carl, I spent many years as a volunteer in my community. In my case, I combined my interests in environmental law, good conversation, fine food, and the company of other lawyers. As chair of the environmental law committee for the local bar association, I held monthly meetings at a good restaurant where my friends and I discussed current environmental topics while earning continuing legal education credits. I also worked diligently to effectively represent my clients and build my practice, happy to discover a natural synergy between these endeavors and my community service. I discovered that my practice and Bar Association work grew in tandem.

Market as you are. Engage in activities you enjoy. Choose activities that reflect your values. Be curious. If you enjoy and value what you do, and try to be effective, others will be drawn to you and appreciate you. That strategy has proven successful for many of us. Try it; it might prove successful for you.



Dennis Coyne has practiced law for thirty-five years, most recently as a shareholder in a major Minnesota law firm. He is also a certified Hudson Institute career coach and certified by the Strozzi Institute as a somatic coach. Dennis works principally with lawyers to better align their values with their busy schedules, take effective action, and achieve results for their clients. As they do so, lawyers learn to better lead their lives, and to become leaders in their communities. Dennis serves as adjunct faculty in the Masters of Arts program in Human Development at St. Mary's College, and has taught law at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. For many years he has convened a highly acclaimed seminar: "Our Challenge-To Thrive in Our Chosen Profession." And since 2005, Dennis has joined with Hamline Law School to present a series of CLE's entitled: "From Rules to Ethics: Identity, Responsibility, and the Recovery of the Law as a Profession."

Dennis can be reached at:
Coyne Coaching and Consulting, LLC
Tel: (612) 375-0155
E-mail: dcoyne@denniscoyne.com