

A person in a dark suit is captured in mid-air, jumping against a bright, hazy sky filled with soft, white clouds. The person's arms are outstretched upwards, and their legs are bent at the knees, suggesting a powerful leap or a moment of triumph. The overall mood is one of aspiration and achievement.

The

10

Characteristics of Top Lawyers

By Steven A. Meyerowitz

All lawyers are relatively intelligent. They write. They deal with colleagues, assistants and clients.

But what elevates a lawyer to a good lawyer, a *top* lawyer? Here are the 10 characteristics that matter.



1. Being a Communicator

“One of the things that I think is important is the ability for an attorney to communicate with people at all levels of education — a juror, a judge, co-counsel and clients and prospective clients,” says Gina F. Rubel, an attorney and the owner of Furia Rubel Communications, a public relations agency in Fountainville. Communications skills, she adds, include the “ability to write succinctly, concisely and with language that the audience understands.”

Lynn E. Rzonca, managing partner of the Philadelphia office of Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll L.L.P., also focuses on the importance of communication when considering the characteristics that make lawyers stand out from the pack. She states that “good lawyers answer their phones, return e-mails and always let the client know the status, even if the status is, ‘I’m still thinking about that.’”

Another lawyer who agrees about the significance of this character trait is Anthony S. Volpe, a founding partner of the Philadelphia-based intellectual property boutique law firm of Volpe and Koenig P.C. He says that although it might be perfectly fine for an attorney to cite a statute to in-house patent counsel when explaining something, lawyers need to “sit down and explain” the law in more understandable terms to clients who are not familiar with it.

2. Being a Good Listener

A corollary to being a good communicator is being a good listener. For Anthony Volpe, that begins with “listening to what the client is saying.” He observes that “many times I sit with younger associates and they do not want to ask a question or the next question for fear of seeming that they do not understand.” But listening and then asking questions to get more information is crucial.

3. Knowing the Client’s Business

William K. Stewart Jr., a co-founder of Kaplin Stewart in Blue Bell, says he believes that it is “essential” to understand a client’s business and the “factors that influence the client’s desire to pursue a transaction.” He adds that knowing a client’s “unique style and personality” and the client’s willingness to assume certain risks also are important. For example, according to Stewart, “a sophisticated and experienced real estate investor might appreciate and take the risk of accepting a property that is not in good condition whereas a different client might not appreciate that kind of risk.”

Jim Durham, chief marketing officer for Ropes & Gray L.L.P. in Boston and the author of *The Essential Little Book of Great Lawyering*, concurs. In his view, “great lawyers know and understand the client’s business” and “know what makes the client successful.”

4. Treating People Properly

A top lawyer knows the right way to interact with people. Lorelee Anne Choman, an attorney in DuBois, says that her mentor “treated everyone with civility and respect, from the office janitor to new associates.” That included “clients, fellow lawyers

and support staff.” Moreover, she says, when she went into her mentor’s office, she “always had 100 percent of his attention.”

Choman’s mentor was respectful even when he had “indefensible cases,” she points out. When she asked him once how he would defend such a matter, she says he replied, “With a white shirt and a smile.”

In Choman’s opinion, “not being civil is a poison to the profession.”

5. Having Fun

“If you’re not having fun, you’re not going to be successful,” says Howard D. Scher, a litigator and shareholder in Philadelphia’s Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney P.C. He recognizes that different people — and different lawyers — have different personalities and that some areas of law are more scholarly and isolated than other areas, requiring “less personality and enthusiasm than is needed for litigation.” However, Scher says that joy is necessary, adding that “the most successful tax lawyers are enthusiastic and love to solve tax problems.”

In this regard, Anthony Volpe advises lawyers to “pick an area of practice that you like. It’s hard to be good at real estate law if you hate real estate.” Given that practicing law “takes a lot of your time, you should like it,” he notes.

6. Working Hard

Being a lawyer is hard, and doing it right takes a lot of work. Many firms are making the effort to find ways to

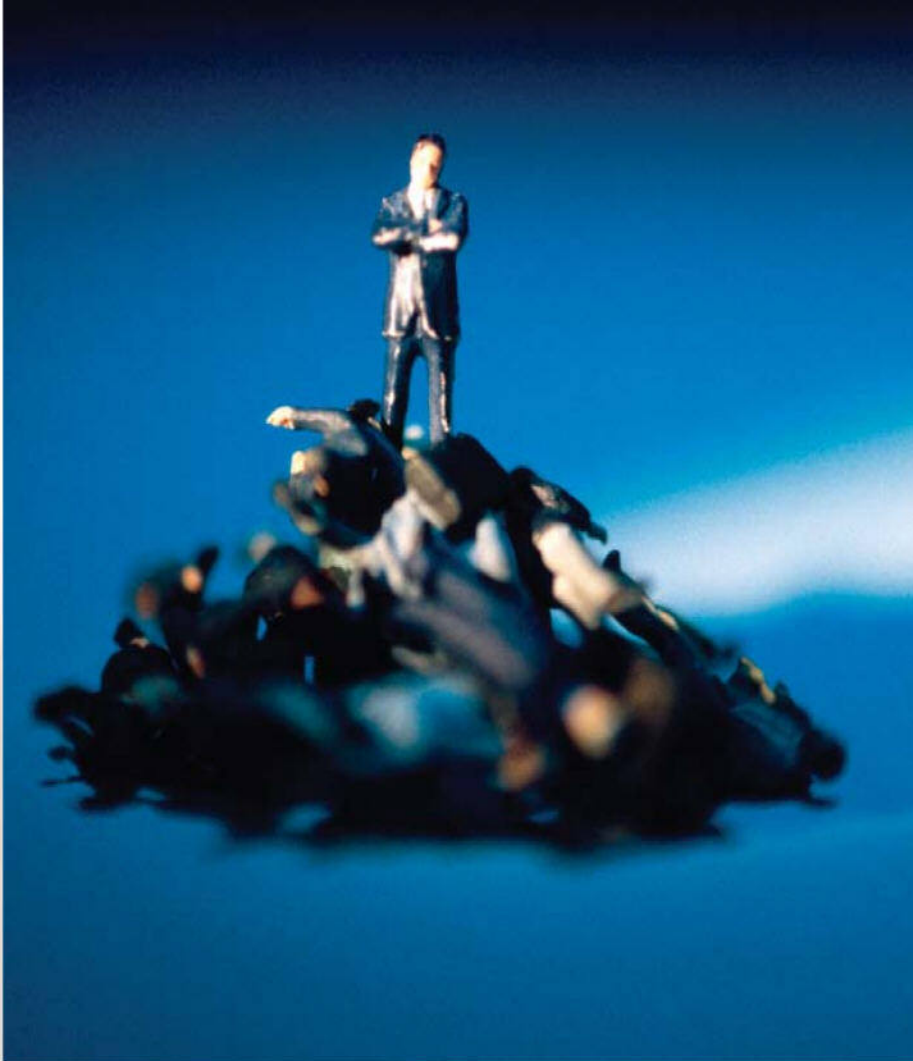
encourage their lawyers to seek better balance in their professional careers and personal lives through job-sharing, part-time schedules, different “tracks” and other methods. But the fact remains, a top lawyer is a lawyer working hard.

For Jim Durham of Ropes & Gray that means being “always available and accessible” to clients. Even more, he says, it requires a “willingness to work hard” and to “do what it takes to get to a good result.” Average lawyers try to deliver, but, he emphasizes, “great lawyers deliver.”

Ballard Spahr’s Lynn Rzonca acknowledges that “the job of a lawyer is demanding” and that “pressures overwhelm.” Top lawyers, she believes, are “dynamic and dedicated,” and yet they also know “when and how to recharge their batteries, whether through community service, doing watercolors or yoga.”

7. Having Great Analytical Skills

Anthony Volpe of Volpe and Koenig says that exceptional lawyers are able to perform “situational analysis,” which he describes as the “ability to sit down and examine the situation a client is in at that time. Look at it, sort out the remedies, throw out those with a small chance of success or where you have to create new law and [then] come up with three or four solutions that fit into the client’s business model and financial wherewithal.”



8. Being a Willing Problem-Solver

“The *sine qua non* of being a good lawyer is liking to help people solve problems,” says Buchanan Ingersoll’s Howard Scher. “If you do not get satisfaction from that, you will not be successful,” Scher said. “From representing indigent defendants in the criminal justice system, which I did for a short time, to helping a neighborhood association resolve its zoning problems, I like to help people,” he adds.

Scher states that it is important to possess the “ability and willingness to collaborate” with a client to help solve the client’s problem. “The client has notions about it, some of which may be profound and some misguided, but a willingness to work collaboratively with the client to solve the problem is

an essential characteristic” of a top lawyer, he says.

Indeed, in his view, the absence of this trait “explains lawyers’ disaffection and misbehaving.”

9. Being a Winner

When all is said and done, a superior lawyer, especially a superior trial lawyer, has one job. To win. As explained by Deborah Addis, the president of a law firm consultancy in Chestnut Hill, Mass., a trial lawyer is at the top of the heap based on “how many cases and what kind of cases” the lawyer has won and whether the lawyer has been involved in “million-dollar cases and large class actions.” It is important for a criminal defense lawyer to “keep defendants out of jail” and for plaintiffs’ lawyers “to get judgments for their clients.”

There is a big plus for lawyers who have argued cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, but it's better to have won, Addis notes. "The saying, 'You're only as good as your last case' may be hackneyed," she admits, "but at the end of the day, it's true. Top lawyers win. And they win again."

10. Gaining Recognition

It is sweet when a lawyer's family or friends think the lawyer is a "great attorney." But the truth of the matter is that top lawyers *are* recognized as such by others, Addis says.

She says that judgments about lawyers made by lawyers, in professional peer reviews and surveys, are helpful in defining who the top lawyers are. Another indication: when a lawyer has clerked for a judge, because the judge actively made a decision to select the lawyer as his or her assistant. And the same can be said for the views of independent editors who publish a lawyer's articles: They are making a decision that the lawyer's work product is worthy of publication, according to Addis.

Addis concedes that these days "public perception" can affect who is seen to be a great lawyer. "Being on television and having your picture in the newspapers" are characteristics of some top lawyers, she says.

Attorney and consultant Gina Rubel adds that a top lawyer "represents himself or herself well and garners positive publicity by representing the profession with dignity, not necessarily with greed."

Conclusion

Certainly, as Lynn Rzonca of Ballard Spahr puts it, there is "no single 'most' important characteristic" of a top lawyer. "The characteristics are an ever-changing mix that depend on client, case and stage of lawyer-life," she says. But a lawyer who has at least some of the characteristics covered here is well on the way to being — and being considered to be — a top lawyer. ☺



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