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By Christina Martini
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By David Susler
National Material L.P.

Being a creative lawyer

Here is a portion of their conversation. An extended version is available at chicagolawyer.com.

What does it mean to you to be a creative lawyer?

Tina Martini: A creative lawyer is one who can think outside the box and who is able to see issues from a variety of angles and perspectives. It's someone who realizes that the best solutions for clients are often a hybrid of good lawyering, good business and good common sense. Creative lawyers ask clients what the ultimate objective is in a given situation and ask them what they are trying to achieve. They realize that there are often a myriad of ways clients can achieve their goals and those options usually pose different levels of legal and business risks, costs and short- and long-term impacts to the business. Sometimes the optimal solution entails a minimal amount of substantive lawyering but nevertheless presents a great opportunity for creative lawyers to put on their business hat and to serve as a trusted business adviser.

A creative lawyer is also someone who can effectively put themselves in the shoes of their clients and other interested parties and understand where they are coming from and how their viewpoints factor into reaching the best solutions. They can meaningfully brainstorm without constraint and, once all the ideas are out on the table, they can then go back and figure out which solutions are optimal.

David Susler: Creativity encompasses more than just good writing and coming up with novel solutions, though those are important components of being creative. Being a creative lawyer also means discerning ways to effectively communicate with clients, opponents and colleagues. I do this in different ways, such as by conducting training sessions on various

topics and discussing why they are important to our business and the consequences of various choices. Other aspects of creative lawyering include a willingness to try new things and challenging assumptions — just because it has never been done before does not mean it is wrong. Also, collaborate and seek input from colleagues — teamwork can lead to very creative solutions.

What advice do you have for lawyers to keep the job interesting?

Martini: I would recommend choosing a practice area and specialty that interests you as well as a working environment that you enjoy. It's also important to figure out where your other professional interests lie and to pursue them. These could be participating in pro bono activities, sitting on boards of directors, being active in bar associations or holding leadership and management roles within or outside of your employer's organization. Given how precious a commodity time is, I would recommend choosing those activities that really speak to you. They will round out your professional experience and help you to be more engaged, thoughtful and effective in your practice, since you will view issues more holistically by virtue of these experiences.

Susler: To keep things interesting, you have to get out from behind your desk. Go visit your client in his/her workplace.

Meet your clients or other lawyers for lunch or dinner; learn about what they do and how they do it; about how they might approach a particular situation.

For me, being a generalist helps keep my job interesting, but that is only half the solution. I like to visit our factories, not only because it makes me a better lawyer, but because it is fun to see how our products are made. We supply raw steel and aluminum extrusions and I enjoy

learning about the various end products our customers make.

I find that fascinating because I learn about so much more than just "the law" and I get to see a much larger context to the import of what I do and what my company does. Our products go into pretty much everything you can think of that may be made out of steel or aluminum, from the bottom of the ocean to outer space, and I maintain interest by learning about all of those products, markets and customers.

I also recommend doing things other than just practicing law. For example, mentor a law student or high school student or volunteer with a not-for-profit.

How do you deal with the stress of the job?

Martini: Every morning, I give myself about 20 minutes of quiet time before I go to work to clear my head as much as possible. This ritual helps me to "de-stress" and mentally prepares me for my day. I also try to get some exercise, preferably outdoors.

I am a writer, so I try to set aside some time each week to write. I also love to read; it helps to keep me current and I find it very thought-provoking and educational.

Susler: No. 1, I think, is having a job I love. I've had jobs that I didn't like and I can tell you that the stress is much easier to deal with in general with a job I enjoy. To relieve stress, I listen to music, read, watch a funny TV show. Like Tina, I also take about 20 minutes of quiet time each morning to clear my head. Going out to dinner with Tina and with friends is also a good stress reliever. ■

David and Tina are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married to each other.

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