

Inside Out > column



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Defining success in the law

Here's another installment of Inside Out with law firm partner Christina Martini and in-house counsel David Susler. They are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married. Watch them talk more about this topic with the Better Government Association's Andy Shaw at chicagolawyer magazine.com. To submit a question for future columns, e-mail questions.insideout@gmail.com.

When defining how to achieve success in the law, what has remained the most constant over the years?

Martini: As with most professions, being successful in the law has always been a multifaceted proposition.

You need a strong intellect, a healthy dose of common sense and a willingness to work very hard. You must also be intellectually curious and have a fire in the belly that will make you push and stretch way beyond the limits you have set for yourself.

You also need to be politically savvy and able to navigate through difficult issues — not just substantive legal problems. Having these skills will enable you to frame your clients' legal issues in a more meaningful way and to be successful in your place of employment.

Susler: I would say there are three essential ingredients, regardless of the nature or locale of your practice: outstanding work, honesty and ethics.

Honesty is being truthful in all that you do, and ethics means not just adhering to the rules but doing what is right and moral. Both are the hallmarks of professionalism.

Ultimately, our legal system is successful only with underlying public trust, and these

fundamentals are central to maintaining that trust. The most successful lawyers embody these pillars of professionalism.

This has been, is and will remain a constant in the legal profession.

What has changed the most over the years?

Martini: Many of the fundamental changes are a result of a few phenomena, including the evolution of the economy and technology.

Global business is moving at an extremely rapid pace, and companies expect their lawyers to move in tandem with their businesses.

Clients also now define value in the context of legal services quite differently. As a result, new and mature lawyers alike must have much more of a client service orientation than before, which includes a deeper understanding of their clients' businesses and a 24/7 commitment to addressing their clients' needs. The law will never will be a 9-to-5 job for those who want to be highly successful.

Having a high EQ is just as important to clients as being able to get to the right legal answer.

You must also be willing to think outside the box and take calculated risks, particularly with the business aspects of your practice and pricing your services.

To remain competitive, you must constantly seek ways to develop your skills. You must make a conscious effort to push to grow and differentiate yourself no matter who you are.

Susler: I completely agree. By its nature, the practice of law is client-focused and our success rises and falls with our ability to serve our clients' needs.

However, there has been a shift in focus from the attorney to the client. This evolution

has tracked the increasing mobility of both lawyers and clients over the past 25 years; previously, both tended to remain with the same firm for the long haul, increasingly lawyers and clients alike regularly change firms.

Speaking as someone who has been on the client side for 15 years, client service and EQ are essential to my perception of successful representation.

Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to others in the profession?

Martini: You have to understand how important it is to be multi-dimensional in your skill set and talents.

It is up to you to decide what that will look like, but you cannot succeed as a one-trick pony. Also, you can never start too early in developing your network. And be sure to do it in an authentic, selfless way.

Always remember that it takes an extraordinary amount of hard work and determination to make it anywhere, especially in the law. Finally, you are the only one who can take charge of your career. Don't let life just happen to you. Be proactive and engaged every step of the way.

Susler: Learn all that you can about your clients, both as businesses and as people. Whether you are a business, personal-injury or criminal lawyer, the more you know about your client, the better you will be able to represent and advise them. The best legal advice is not rendered in a vacuum.

You can always find a "legal" answer to an issue, but real life is not like law school. You must give advice within a context that is useful and meaningful to your client. ■

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