

10 lessons you weren't taught in law school essay sample

Law



It is often said law schools fail to prepare students for the actual practice of law. Yes, law school does a good job at training you to “ think like a lawyer” and spot issues, do legal research, draft legal documents, and put together a legal argument. But there are so many practical things that law school doesn't teach you, especially a number of soft skills. This includes things like social grace, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, optimism, and resilience. Here are ten critical skills missing from many law school curricula.

1. How to Handle Conflict

“ Don't Let Intimidation Drive Your Litigation Strategy” Most of the time, your client will be in a conflict with someone else. Your role is to represent the client in the conflict with competence. Most people don't enjoy being in conflict. Conflict is uncomfortable, triggers stress responses, and can make you angry. Because of our desire to win, it often brings out the absolute worst in all of us. Law schools should teach ways of engaging in conflict that are constructive, healthy, and maintains civil relationships with opposing counsel. This can be done by valuing emotional intelligence, tact, and grace over aggression.

Law schools should teach students that they are a part of the larger legal community, and today's opposing counsel may be tomorrow's judge, co-counsel, co-worker, or your best referral partner. Students should never think about an interaction with a particular lawyer as a single transaction. Law students should also learn different conflict styles and be familiar with their own conflict style. Graduates should come with a toolbox full of different ways of living with, working through, and managing conflict. It's not enough
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to teach or talk about civility as an abstract concept. Students should also understand that conflict isn't inherently bad, and can be used as an opportunity to grow and strengthen a relationship.

2. How to Forgive

“ Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for it to kill your enemy.” – Nelson Mandela I used to walk around with a rolodex of every terrible thing that people said or did to me. This included classmates, bosses, co-workers, judges, opposing counsel, clients, family, and friends. That's a lot of baggage to carry around.

When you're in the conflict management business, people are bound to step on your toes and piss you off. How do you let go of these feelings of anger, resentment, hostility and revenge? How do you stop these experiences from consuming you? The answer lies with forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't mean you forget about what the other person did (that's probably unwise anyway). It doesn't mean you have to kiss and makeup. It's not about repairing the relationship, although, in certain situations, it can certainly involve that. And it doesn't mean letting the other person off the hook or condoning their behaviour. The primary beneficiary of forgiveness is yourself.

Law schools can foster an environment where forgiveness is a valued skill by encouraging professors to discuss it in the classroom and give students the opportunity to practice it. To forgive each other can enhance the moral of the student body and increase social bond.

3. How to Have Difficult and Uncomfortable Conversations

I could not have imagined the incredibly difficult conversations I would have with my clients over the years. There are the usual uncomfortable calls to remind a client about an unpaid invoice, quoting a fee, or telling her that you lost a Motion for Summary Judgement. We constantly deal with incredibly delicate issues and are charged with delivering life altering news yet we don't receive any training on how to do this. We also don't receive any training on ways to manage our own internal challenges of being in these difficult situations. It took me many years to figure out how to manage these difficult conversations with grace, authenticity, and compassion — key ingredients needed to make a good lawyer.

4. How to be Present

“ How to Increase Focus on Productivity with Mindfulness” As lawyers, our time is the commodity we trade for money. The more fully present we can be in each moment, the better we will be as lawyers. Luckily, being in the moment is a trainable and learnable skill. Some law schools are, in fact, teaching contemplative lawyering skills, which includes mindfulness — learning to be in the present moment without preference or judgment. As lawyers, we must be agile and able to pivot as information is gathered. If our mind is completely preoccupied with thoughts about the future or the past, we can't be fully be present to process the information available to us, hindering our ability to be agile and pivot when necessary.

5. How to Maintain Physical and Emotional Health

As lawyers, we have a duty to provide competent representation to a client.

And to do that, we must maintain our mental, emotional, and physical health. The key to maintaining your mental, emotional, and physical health is self-care. You must be self-aware enough to recognize and care for your mental health, which requires noticing when you are experiencing stress or anxiety. In order to care for your emotions, you must be able to recognize when you are experiencing negative emotions and find healthy ways of working through them. Maintaining your physical health requires a balance of exercise, rest, and a healthy diet. Law schools should bring more awareness to this and start teaching law students tools for self-care. This would help many of the problems which is so prevalent in our profession — burnout, depression, alcohol and substance abuse.

6. How to Be Compassionate

When I say compassionate, what I am referring to is our innate feeling of wanting to help when witnessing someone else's suffering. What I am not referring to is sympathy, being soft, or let's hold hands and sing Kumbaya. In our line of work, we often witness a lot of pain. Rarely do clients come into our office to share happy news. In many ways, our relationship to our clients is very intimate. We gain inside information about our client that she wouldn't share with anyone else. Therefore, our ability to handle the suffering of our clients without losing ourselves is a critically important skill. Maintaining a healthy balance between our client's difficulties and ourselves is a skill that can only come with practice. It's important to know how to be compassionate with our client's suffering while being compassionate towards ourselves. This is an essential part of self-care. If we can't recognize that we're hurting and take time to care for ourselves, we begin to deplete our

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mental and emotional reserve. When lawyers continue to push ourselves without refilling our reserve, he or she will experience burnout.

7. How to Manage Personal Finances

Law students often graduate with \$150, 000 or more in student loan debt. Rarely do these students seriously think about what repaying that amount of debt looks like. When I taught a Solo Practice Management course, I was surprised at how few students could answer questions these basic questions: How much do you owe?

What will be your monthly minimum payments?

How much do you have to earn to be able to repay that loan within a reasonable amount of time? If your gross income was \$100, 000, what would be your net income? What is your anticipated monthly living expenses?

As a bankruptcy attorney, I'm seeing an increased number of graduates (some law school graduates) who clearly had little or no understanding of what it will take to repay the debt. Even one-day course on personal finance would go a long way in giving students basic tools to help understand and manage their financial futures.

8. How to Manage Law Firm Finances

“ Law Firm Finances: Everything You Need to Get Started”

For most lawyers, the practice of law is a business. It's a profit driven activity, yet there is little or no emphasis on the business end of the law practice. This includes things like law firm finance, understanding overhead, hiring/managing staff, how to price your services, as well as marketing and

advertising. Some basic knowledge of law firm finance would not only benefit students who are going into solo practice, but also those who go on to work in a law firm.

9. How to Create and Sustain Your Own Brand

Long gone are the days where most law student graduates find a nice associate job, make partner seven years later, and retire at the same firm. Lawyers must actively market and brand themselves. They must also grow and learn to leverage their network. They must figure out their own networking style and understand what works for them. This doesn't happen overnight. It's a skill law students should be encouraged to hone from their first day in law school. Law students should be familiar with social media and proper ways to use it to promote themselves. Too often, law students don't pay enough attention to networking during law school.

10. How to Collaborate With Others (Nicely)

During my first year in law school, I was doing legal research for a Research & Writing class. When I went to the library to pull the book that I needed, I was horrified to find that the pages I needed had been torn out of the book. Stories like this are all too familiar in law school. I don't know if law school attracts students who enjoy aggressive competition, or if law school trains them to become this way, but we must equip students with more tools than one. Law students should understand that even in adversarial situations, cooperation is often critical in moving a case forward towards a resolution. Students should also know you can zealously represent your clients without

demonizing the other side. And at the end of the day, you can safely enjoy a beer with opposing counsel.