



WHAT I WISH I KNEW THEN



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Being a young lawyer is hard. Every lawyer will remember experiences they had as a young lawyer and think back on “what they wish they knew then.” These lawyers came through those early years of practice wiser from their experiences, good and bad, and learned lessons they then honed over years of practice.

In effort to shed some light at the end of the tunnel for ADLA’s young lawyers, **J.S. “Chris” Christie**, **Angel A. Croes**, and **Allen Estes** touch on “what they wish they knew then.”

1. What are some of the important things an associate should know about managing and living up to partner expectations?

J.S. “Chris” Christie: Law firm expectations for associates have changed for the better from decades ago. For example, on my first day as an associate, the partner giving me my firm orientation half-jokingly told me the firm’s flexible holiday and vacation policy for associates: Every year, associates had off the Fourth of July and Christmas; in addition, associates had 15 vacation or holiday days off and could take those 15

days any Saturdays or Sundays they wanted.

Being successful as an associate depends on meeting expectations. One of my best lawyer friends left our firm without making partner despite his being talented, well liked, and one of the hardest working associates. His problem: he never told any partner no. He had so much work, and from different partners, he too often could not provide the work product in the time he was expected to do so. He failed to manage and thus meet expectations; it cost him.

Associates should recognize that most partners, even the best lawyers,

are usually not ideal bosses and may not provide associates adequate expectations and feedback. Most partners spend years learning to be a lawyer, not how to manage people.

For the partners with whom you work, find out the partner's expectations for you. Hopefully, that can be done by talking with the partner. Ask the partner for feedback. But don't ask the partner so often you become a pest. Use your judgment, just as you would for any other relationship.

And talk with others who work or worked with the partner. If you still don't know enough after these steps, guess what the expectations should be, do your best, and then learn through trial and error.

Expectations should be a two-way street. An associate manages partners' expectations by letting the partners know the associate's expectations. Manage expectations early and diplomatically. Try not to wait until a problem arises.

As examples, associates should let partners know when they need time off, whether they understand how to do what they have been asked to do, and whether the work they have is what they want to do. Whatever expectations are a priority to you, let those you work with know.

Part of being happy in life, as well as an associate, is learning what other people want from you and then how best to give or not give them what they want. You are a lawyer with great potential. Use the same skills that have taken you to where you are to plan and become the lawyer you want to be.

Angel A. Croes: Above all, partners want an associate that will be proactive in handling files and driving defense strategies.

There is certainly a sweet spot that lies somewhere between being self-sufficient and proactive in the sense of taking ownership of the case, while also recognizing when to seek the partner's advice, input and/or approval.

Having played both the associate and partner role, I can tell you that the most desired and mutually beneficial dynamic is one where both lawyers are actively contributing to the defense and working together. The most valued type of associate is one that is not afraid to offer defense strategy recommendations, that looks beyond task-based assignments to the case overall and aims to develop an end-game, and that works the case as if he or she is ultimately responsible for the outcome.

Allen Estes: The Partner is your client. Find out what the expectations are and exceed them when possible. To figure out what the expectations are, you must ask (and ask again, if needed).

2. What should associates avoid doing?

J.S. "Chris" Christie: Associates should avoid doing mediocre work. Not doing your best would likely make your firm unhappy with you and you unhappy with your job and with yourself.

Your work might be mediocre because the work is not what you want to do, because you do not have enough work, or because you have too much work. Regardless, do the work well, at least for a while, and if not satisfied, at the same time plan to shift to work you want to do, or to have more work, or to have less work – preferably at the same firm, but possibly elsewhere.

Plan and use the skills you have learned to solve other problems, so you have the type and amount of work you want to have.

Angel A. Croes: Hurrying.

There seems to be such an overwhelming and self-imposed sense of urgency that is prevalent amongst associates these days. I realize that there is a lot of pressure in our industry to be both thorough and efficient, but when we focus too much on output, quality suffers.

I would rather receive a solid, well-written and well-thought-out work product that takes a significant amount of time to prepare, than a stack of reports that were prepared in haste. There is nothing worse than a partner having to waste time proofreading a product as opposed to focusing on substance.

A poorly proofread product, no matter how solid its contents or substance, causes clients to quickly lose confidence and we lose credibility. It's akin to reading a typo in the New York Times. It may be small and insignificant to the entire piece of work, but it's glaring to the reader.

Allen Estes: a. Don't assume you know how a partner or client wants things done; ask them.

b. Don't send an email when a phone call is better for the question. Or better yet, ask in person.



June 16, 1989: Judge Seybourn H. Lynne with Chris and Sturgeon Christie.

Judge Lynne was appointed to the Northern District of Alabama bench in January 1946 as President Truman's first United States District Court appointment. I clerked for Judge Lynne for a year, beginning in July 1987, after graduating from law school and then teaching for two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer at the University of Yaoundé School of Law in Cameroon. Sturgeon is ten months old in the photo. He is 33 years old today.



Doing pro bono work helps you focus on serving your clients – paying and pro bono. As to pro bono service, the Alabama Rules of Professional Conduct, Rule 6.1, “Pro Bono Public Service,” provide that a “lawyer should render public interest legal service.”

Angel A. Croes: Communication is key.

While associates often don’t communicate directly with clients, they should stay apprised of how often we are reporting and remind the partner when an update is in order.

The ideal situation is one where the associate is proactive and prepares updates regularly, without being prompted, even if it’s nothing more than to say that nothing significant has happened over the past thirty (30) days.

The worst situation is one where a client has to reach out to ask for an update.

Allen Estes: A lawyer must know everything you can about a client’s business. Start early, as an associate, keeping up to date on all aspects of a client’s (and potential clients) business operations. Google Alerts are a great way to start this process.

3. Describe your philosophy regarding client relationships. Moreover, what are some things an associate can do to help maximize the relationship with a client?

J.S. “Chris” Christie: A lawyer has an ethical duty to act in the client’s best interests. That duty should control your relationship with your client.

The State of Alabama gives lawyers, as professionals, a license to help clients solve their legal problems. Remember, you have the state licensed privilege to serve clients.

Without your saying so directly, through what you say and write to the client, the court and others, your clients should know you have been acting, are acting, and will act in their best interests. Usually, timely and prompt communications are as important as what is said or written. Maximize your relationship with the client by building trust; build trust through what you say and write to, for and about the client.

4. What are your top tips for developing business?

J.S. “Chris” Christie: Of the five questions, this question is the one I might be least qualified to address. As an associate, I developed some business and usually had enough business for myself and at times others. But I have not considered myself a rainmaker.



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Ideally, doing great legal work should result in great client relationships, a solid reputation, and developing business. The best clients often are those who call you because you do great legal work. If the client has confidence in you, the client is likely to call you again and tell others to call you.

Get to know the client, its business, and its legal needs. Let the client know you, or someone else at your firm, can handle the client's needs. Work often comes from existing clients.

Granted, clients at times cannot tell good from poor legal work. So, you probably should do more than good legal work to develop business.

To send you business, potential clients and possible referring lawyers must know who you are and what you can do well. Become active in the community and the bar. Join lawyer organizations, like the ADLA, and be active members.

Develop a subject matter expertise on which you publish and speak. Plan where you speak and publish so potential clients, or lawyers who might refer business to you, hear you or read what you have written.

When speaking or publishing, or when serving on a community organization or bar or other lawyer organization committee, do your best. Your reputation for doing good work will likely be part of what helps you develop business.

Angel A. Croes: Remembering that we're all just people.

Listening to clients, taking note of what's going in their personal lives when they let you in, remembering to ask about those things, and sometimes letting go of the formalities to just have a regular conversation. Those things go a long way.

Ultimately, we all just want to work with people we like. So do our clients.

Allen Estes: a. Be nice; you never know when you are talking to a potential client. b. Ask and listen more than you talk. c. Keep learning about new areas of business and the law.

5. If you could give one piece of advice to yourself as a young lawyer, what would it be?

J.S. "Chris" Christie: Remember your priorities. Not just what you would like to say are your priorities, but what really is most important to you.



Personally, I think my priorities are, and hope my priorities are, in order: faith, family, friends and firm. By firm, I mean my work as a lawyer.

How might I tell what are my true priorities? By what I spend my scarce resources. For most lawyers, including me, my most scarce resource usually becomes time. After working enough to provide the basics, on what do I spend my time?

Angel A. Croes: Find your niche early on. Find something you're good at, or that you enjoy, and hone that.

Become an expert in something. That way, eventually, you will be someone's "go-to". And that's where the real growth begins.

Allen Estes: Think like a Partner from day one. To do that, you must ask multiple partners what they think about on a daily basis. I'm always amazed at the different ways seemingly similar attorneys analyze and attack the issues they face.



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