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The Complete Lawyer

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How does your pastor define a "complete lawyer"? What characteristics do friends list when describing a "complete lawyer"? What is your client looking for in a "complete lawyer"?

Perspective matters when meeting with a client, talking to opposing counsel, picking a jury, or finding the perfect fishing hole. So, to understand perceptions of lawyers, I posed a question to clients, family, clergy, business owners, and attorneys: What is a complete lawyer?

Some answers were blunt: "Leave the lawyer ego at home. You have a good education—that's it. You have to prove the rest." Some answers were accurately funny: "I am like your wife—handle me that way." And some answers were aspirational: "Have another lawyer tell you, 'If I ever get sued, I want you to be my lawyer.'" Overall, the responses reflected seven pervasive characteristics of "The Complete Lawyer": (1) good listener, (2) effective communicator, (3) prepared, (4) humble, (5) well-rounded, (6) professionally invested, and (7) honest.

1. Be "Other-Centered"—Listen, Listen, Listen!

The most pervasive response was summarized when a client simply explained that "a lawyer's job is to listen." Accordingly, a complete lawyer is "other-centered" and understands others' goals and perspectives.

One businessman expressed concern that too many attorneys "assume that they know clients' goals." This concern is pervasive, because many clients believe that their businesses are placed into broad categories (e.g., commercial litigation) that do not accurately reflect each client's unique perspective and concerns. Thus, it is professionally imperative to follow a client's advice that attorneys "take time to *first understand* the client's business, because each is different." Similarly, another client emphasized that a complete lawyer's "true starting point" begins with understanding a client's objectives; attorneys must then "take steps focused on that objective" through execution and communication.

2. Communicate: Speak *Humanese*.

An attorney noted, "Precision in our communication with one another is key." Unfortunately, attorneys are repeatedly cited for one of two errors: (1) being non-responsive and (2) substituting "legalese" for "humanese."

First, responsiveness was identified as "critical" to an attorney's reputation and relationships with clients. Indeed, one client's "biggest pet peeve is when an attorney is non-responsive to phone calls and correspondence." Thus, lawyers must respond promptly;

complete lawyers are always able to respond within 24 hours.

But responsiveness, by itself, is insufficient if the attorney does not communicate clearly. For example, one client wants lawyers to speak "humanese"—not legalese—to communicate effectively. Moreover, speaking humanese alleviates concerns that attorneys hide behind legalese to avoid addressing a situation's realities in a sincere, straightforward manner. A straightforward approach is clearly important, as evidenced by three warnings:

- "Don't sugarcoat the value of the case; always be upfront."
- "No CYA—tell it like it is."
- "Don't give the client a fire drill."

Some attorneys may not heed these warnings, because hiding behind legalese may be a simpler option. But complete lawyers are confident enough to be straightforward and accountable; the complete lawyer's confidence stems, in part, from diligent preparation.

3. Preparation.

One respondent noted that a complete lawyer "comes prepared for the unexpected." Indeed, attorneys should be prepared for unexpected, even dramatic, developments. But more commonly, complete lawyers should prepare for the *expected*—especially others' expectations.

For example, clients expect their lawyers to "take the time to understand a client's business—*ours is always different*—before lawyering." Attorneys are expected to know "their client . . . what makes them tick . . . and what the client is looking for or expects."

Thus, a complete lawyer prepares specifically and uniquely for each case and client. Additionally, a complete lawyer's preparation reflects a professionalism and responsibility that extends to relationship-building. After all, as one client noted, "I am much more familiar with the lawyers that I work with than I am with their firms."

4. Life Outside the Law: Fishing Expeditions Are Not Discovery Requests.

Overwhelmingly, clients and attorneys believe that complete lawyers have hobbies and "a life outside the law." In fact, one attorney cautioned that regret awaits those who "sacrifice relationships (including marriage or family) for money or professional achievements." Some clearly heed this warning.

Last month, our office had a bright Monday morning when one of our attorneys circulated pictures of an enormous fish that he caught while fishing with his family. Also last month, this lawyer's billable hours, preparation, and production exceeded his exacting standards. Thus, he showed that personal and professional lives can properly balance.

5. Humility: Be a Diver, Not a Skater.

With the presumable exception of displaying a captured fish, complete lawyers "are not the ones who scream and pound their chest." Instead, complete lawyers understand that "it's not about them." Thus, complete lawyers are not ego-driven; they follow one priest's encouragement to "be a diver, not a skater." As "divers," complete lawyers do not "skate" on the surface; they seek depth for true perspective of each case. Accordingly, complete lawyers are professionals driven to add value *for their client*. Therefore, a complete lawyer would not be troubled by one respondent's rhetorical question: "If there is no value, why do it?"

Adding value extends to clients' perception that complete lawyers treat "opposing counsel fairly and professionally," and thus, may develop relationships "making negotiations easier and possibly result in lower settlements." Professionalism includes complete lawyers acting graciously—whether in victory or defeat—because they understand the importance of relationships. This understanding incorporates long-term goals, which was emphasized by one attorney's emphasis: "The practice of law is a marathon, not a sprint." And both marathon runners and complete lawyers share a will to persevere.

6. Invested in the Legal Profession—Persistence and Consistency.

One attorney believes that "too many lawyers have stopped thinking and just follow a script or some form passed down from other lawyers." Similarly, a client wants her lawyers to think "outside the box to get a case resolved instead of just checking boxes on each case." These comments show that complete lawyers are experts, not static "form generators." Complete lawyers are professionally invested through educational seminars, case review, and trend analysis. This investment is demanding and requires persistence and consistency.

An oft-used analogy describing persistence involves Major League Baseball, because most Hall of Fame hitters failed to get a hit in about two-thirds of their at-bats (*i.e.*, batting averages around .333). The common lesson emphasizes persistence in the face of failure. But upon closer inspection, there is an additional point: the best hitters consistently approached every at-bat—even their "failed" at-bats—with professionalism and an expectation of success. The additional lesson reveals that success requires a

consistently professional approach. Complete lawyers utilize consistent persistence to invest in the legal profession—and their own integrity.

7. Honest.

One attorney advised, "*Always* keep your word." Similarly, another asked a question: "Have you ever told an opposing attorney, 'No, I don't need a Rule 11 on that issue, I trust you.?'?" Your answer to that question illustrates the collegiality—or potential for improved collegiality—in the legal profession. As an experienced attorney explained, "Honesty is . . . what we all should want from one another, and the more we exhibit it, the more likely it is we shall receive it in return."

Earning peers' trust is valued in any profession—especially in a profession that usually demands written agreements. In the legal profession, many attorneys engender trust because their honesty embodies the highest ideals of ethical and professional advocacy. Further, honest attorneys earn the respect of their clients. As a result, the "most valuable lawyers, who have the most enduring relationship with clients, are 'trusted advisors.'"

Conclusion

One of legendary Coach John Wooden's most relevant maxims was: "You '*handle*' farm animals. You *work with* people." In our profession, complete lawyers do not "handle" their clients, cases, or other attorneys. Instead, complete lawyers *work with* others by listening and communicating. Also, complete lawyers' integrity supports their drive to develop themselves personally and professionally. Their development becomes their reputation. And as their reputation is established, complete lawyers zealously follow one attorney's advice: "Be the guardian of your reputation—no one else can do that for you."

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