

Three ideal traits of the law firm lawyer

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"Oh no!" My wife and I were just beginning a two-week vacation when she remembered the juror questionnaire. She had recently received the notice and, naturally, the deadline to respond fell right in the middle of our vacation. Intending to submit the questionnaire before leaving, she had taken the forms to her office, but forgotten to complete and mail them.

"Call your people and have them take care of it," I said.

"My people?" she replied.

This got me thinking about one of the benefits of working in a big firm that I had been taking for granted. After several years of practice, there are a few dozen attorneys that I know well enough to call friends. They are the kind of friends that I would trust with my assets and the well-being of my family, the kind of people I would trust to sign my name with all the attendant repercussions.

I started to think through the people in my firm that I know and trust. As I thought through the list, I realized that I had not known some of them for long. It was not the length of the friendships that made them reliable. It was that they were attorneys with three common qualities: they were meticulously honest, generous, and responsible.

Obviously, honesty is a trait expected of everyone, attorneys and non-attorneys alike. But for attorneys, honesty is more than a virtue; it is a professional qualification. There are professional rules of conduct addressing honesty, and all of the oaths of admission that I have taken have addressed it in one way or another. Perhaps then it is no surprise that the people I work with are meticulously honest.

So what about generosity?

Law firms are among the largest contributors to various charitable causes, and pro bono work is only one way in which attorneys are generous to society at large. Within the firm, there is also a wealth of generosity on an interpersonal level. Hardly a week goes by where one coworker or another does not offer to buy me lunch, or vice versa. Even more compelling is the overarching generosity with time. Despite high billing requirements and the pressures of large firm life, I have rarely been turned away when seeking help or advice from another.

Which brings me to responsibility.

Naturally, it takes a certain level of responsibility to make it through college and law school with the level of performance required to get a job in a large firm. Meeting the demands of large firm clients requires even more responsibility – with time, money, and deadlines – if an attorney is simply to survive. This makes a big firm attorney the perfect friend to have when you need to be confident that something will get done – such as a fax response to a juror questionnaire.

Twice in the last week I have forgotten an important document related to personal business outside the office. Each time, I have been relieved to know that I had people I could trust to go through my personal documents, whom I knew would take the time to do it simply because I had asked them to, and whom I could rely on to send it to me quickly, just as they had promised.

It's easy to take something for granted when we have never known it to be any other way. For my part, I'm glad that my wife's comment prompted me to stop and take the time to appreciate how fortunate I am to be surrounded not only by professional colleagues, but also by trusted friends.

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