49 TIPS FOR THE NEW LAWYER
49 Tips for the New Lawyer

By Merrilyn Astin Tarlton

This is not going to be easy. But you knew that well before you passed the bar. (Congratulations, by the way!) There are a lot of lessons you will need to learn the hard way. Still. It would be nice, wouldn't it, to have a slight edge when starting out as a new lawyer? Perhaps an older, savvier friend to fill you in on subtler codes of conduct or to introduce you to the court clerk. Someone to grab you by the elbow and steer you away from trouble and toward better decisions. Or even a cranky old guy to "teach you a thing or two."

We think so, too. So consider this list of tips and truths your friendly kick to the shins under the conference table and, in some cases, a not-so-subtle kick in the pants. We've compiled "49 Tips for the New Lawyer" to help you get out of the blocks with the best start possible. Whether you're backed up by an army of support staff and senior partners or valiantly braving it solo, soak up some of this sound advice and see if it doesn't help the hard lessons hit a little softer.

(Psssst. You'll find more than just 49 great tips here — there are also 128 links to some of Attorney at Work's most popular posts.)

Merrilyn Astin Tarlton is a founding member of the Legal Marketing Association, past Trustee and President of the College of Law Practice Management and recipient of the LMA Hall of Fame award.
There are people around you who know more than you do. Let them help you. Contrary to your every instinct, you do not have to know the answer to everything. Besides, nobody likes a smarty pants.
As a general rule, the ability a person has to screw everything up for you is inversely proportional to their pay grade. So keep your staff happy.
Your client is always right. (Most of the time, that is.)

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Calming Down an Angry Client
Fire a Client
Your answer should never be “No, you can’t!” Try “Okay, let’s figure out how you can.”
Return phone calls, emails and texts promptly. Really.
You are going to have to pay your dues. It may seem the work is beneath you. You may not enjoy it. Others may take credit for it. But to get to the really juicy stuff, you’ll have to carry someone else’s brief bag.
Try, in everything you do, to teach as well as tell.
Before beginning the work, ask your client or supervisor what success will look like. Don't just guess. Chances are, you'll be wrong.
You are responsible for getting all the facts you need. Even if people don't want to give them to you.
While your client or colleague is in your law office, you are the host. Act like one.
Under-promise and over-deliver. Never the other way around.

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Always be just a little bit early for an appointment. If you must be late, call ahead to warn them. It shows that you think they are important. Everyone likes to feel important.
It's much easier to look at the big picture first and then figure out the little pieces than it is to fiddle with the little pieces and then try to make a decent big picture out of them.
There's a difference between “telling” someone something and “communicating” it. In the first case, it left your lips. In the second, it left your lips, entered their mind and was understood. You are responsible for the entire cycle.
While people around you may worry about their rates compared to other lawyers, your client is only concerned about fees in relationship to the value the work has to them. Try to think like your client. Always.
Maintain your instrument. It is at least as important to rest and renew as it is to work hard and do “important stuff.” In fact, if you neglect vacations and downtime you will soon lose the capacity to do the important stuff well.
Sometimes the best answer is the one someone else thought of. Acknowledge that and give them credit. The long-term payoff will far surpass the momentary glory of feeling you were the smartest. Bright people will come back to work with you again.
Your supervisor, mentor or senior partner is neither your mother nor your professor. She or he won’t take responsibility for your personal or professional development. That’s your job.
When you complete a matter or a task, ask for feedback. Be clear that you’re not looking for flattery — you honestly want to know how to improve next time.
It's time to clean up your act online. Potential clients know how to use Google just like you. So do employers, colleagues, reporters and everyone else. Make sure you look (mostly) professional.
Offer to help.

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- Take Five Steps Up to Leadership
- Take a Risk: Trust
- Managing Up
Other people are busy, too.
Value and guard their time as mightily as your own.
Take notes. It helps you remember, and it shows people that you believe what they are saying is important enough to write down. (Look them in the eye once in a while, too.)
Say please and thank you.
Remember that clients don’t always want a lawyer. Sometimes they just need someone to listen to them.
Smile and look people in the eye. Be interested in them. (Even if you think you aren't. You might be surprised.)
Put down that device and pay attention.
Meet as many new people, from every walk of life, as you can. Thank those who make introductions by introducing them to good people.
It's never too soon to work on your business development skills.
Don't brag about yourself. (Even if it is true.) Instead, brag about others. They'll always remember it and perhaps brag about you next time.
Keep an orderly desk. People draw conclusions about the state of your mind and your ability to think clearly based on the state of your office. No one wants to work with a messy thinker.
Always apologize when appropriate, but don't make a huge deal out of it. You don't want to embarrass them — or yourself.
If you know it’s a good idea, but they tell you it’s “never been done that way” (but can’t tell you why not), do it anyway. But be gracious about it.
Be kind in your daily interactions. Have compassion.

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Wheaton's Law (Don't Be a Dick!)
Allow yourself to make mistakes as long as you learn from them.
Allow others to make mistakes as well. Learn from those.
Often your client’s or supervisor’s goal will be different from what she says it is. (She may not even know what it is!) Listen between the lines and repeat back what you hear to make sure you’re both on the same page.
Learn how to brainstorm, but know when it's time to blow the whistle and commit to a direction.
No one cares about your grade point average now. Really. They just care how well you can perform on behalf of your client.
Accept compliments with grace. Shrugging them off demeans the giver.
Keep a “me” file. When someone pays you a compliment, gives you a good performance review, passes you a flattering note ... drop it in there. A time will come when you need to close the door and remind yourself how good you are. This will help.

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Be curious. Learn about things with no bearing on your work. You’ll be surprised at how often seemingly “irrelevant” information ends up being highly useful.
Be honest. Have integrity. Show grace under pressure.

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Listen when others are speaking. Don’t start working on your response until you hear them out and understand.
Dressing professionally is important. Dressing to kill is a mistake.

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Legal Editing With Three Simple Questions
If you don't know something, ask.

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