

Letter to a New Partner

Keep hold of your humility, stay centered, and start (or keep) having fun.



BY BRIAN H. CORCORAN

Making partner in a law firm is a quintessential moment for celebration. Even raucous celebration: In my office, it's not unusual to hear loud screams of joy closely following the annual partnership announcements, sounds more commonly heard on TV game shows like "The Price is Right" when contestants are invited to "Come on down!" Of course, given the amounts of personal sacrifice and hard work required to reach the law firm summit that is partnership, perhaps such uninhibited expressions of personal triumph are forgivable.

Yet, in the days that follow, after the congratulatory dinners and cocktail parties have ended, the average newly minted partner is also likely to nurse a few doubts about his or her new title. Some of this is just bred in the bone; lawyers, risk-averse by nature, are genetically inclined to look for storm clouds on the brightest of horizons. And yet, attaining partnership can be a time for soul-searching and even dread at the increased burdens to come.

Certainly achieving partnership is an excellent opportunity for reflection—but it need not all be negatively oriented. So, with the appropriate nod to the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, whose *Letters to a Young Poet* inspires this list, I'd like to propose the following admonitions that every new partner might contemplate:

- **Remember how it began.** Although the most pompous of partners may behave as if they sprang fully clothed, Greek mythologically speaking, from the head of a Supreme Court justice, this is not true. All of us were once first-year associates. We knew little to nothing about what it meant to "practice" law—and practice we had to do. In a word, we were idiots, albeit diligent enough to work through that limitation.

Making partner is an affirmation of how far you have come and how much you know. But it does not mean that there's nothing left to master in your professional development. Every year, with every case I work on, a new insight occurs to me about competent lawyering that eluded me before. And, luckily for us all, we're part of a profession in which longevity is not frowned upon. Gray hair only means you're hitting your prime, affording us new opportunities each day to expand our knowledge and skills.

So as you assume the mantle of partner, keep hold of your humility—you're not done learning by a long shot. Indeed, it is highly likely some of your future "teachers" will not be the mentors/partners who helped you get where you are today, but the lowly associates below you toiling in obscurity on a deal or big case. Listen to them, as their fresh perspective may well aid you in whatever future matters come across your desk. And as you watch them sweat the details of deposition prep or document production, make sure who you are, to them, the good mentor that once aided you (or that you wish had).

- **Keep telling yourself: I'm a professional!** We are always hearing these days about how law has become a business. Becoming a partner leads to even greater exposure to the business side of private practice, from preparing bills to generating new clients, all of which are very important to keeping the "lights on" in the office, so to speak. But, the last time I checked, lawyers were not MBAs, and the ones that do have the extra degree usually aren't found in law firms. No matter how big your bonus or how many hours you billed last year, most of us are still not even coming close to earning what a 30-year-old analyst at a successful hedge fund is making in bonuses alone.

To some, this might be a depressing thought, but I take comfort in it. Most of us did not become attorneys simply to make money, but rather to be part of the vibrant system

of laws that undergirds much of the daily bump and grind of life, including the work of those Midas-like hedge fund folks. We are part of an honorable tradition that counsels and guides the uninitiated, our clients, through what can seem like a morass of confusing laws and regulations. We are trusted to regulate ourselves and also keep the “pipes clean,” by questioning and challenging the processes and guidelines that define how disputes are resolved, all with the goal of making them as transparent and fair as possible. We are more than hired guns—even when our clients tell us otherwise.

Being a professional means not just upholding high self-imposed standards, however. It also means that we owe it to ourselves, and our colleagues, to carry out our tasks with as much grace and civility as possible. More so, we have responsibilities to our courts and our communities as well. Whether that means actively pursuing pro bono opportunities within your firm, volunteering in the charity or nonprofit organization of your choice, or otherwise serving the public good in some other capacity, is for each of you to decide.

But doing so should be viewed as part of being a partner. Elevation to partnership makes you representative of the legal bar wherever it is you practice, and hence subject to greater scrutiny—and so you must try to be even more cognizant than before of how well you reflect these professional values. If you do this successfully, you may not change the world, but you just might make your neighbor a little more reluctant to spring another tired “how many lawyers does it take” joke on you.

• **“Be the ball, Danny.”** Such is the zen-master advice Chevy Chase gave the young hero of the classic comedy “Caddyshack,” but I’d give it in modified form to any new partner as well. To me, it means stay centered, stick to your knitting. While making partner can involve many factors outside one’s control, including internal firm politics, the circumstances of the marketplace and the demand for your specialty, you would not have been so elevated if your colleagues and clients did not respect your abilities as an attorney and your focus on getting the job done. Concern for the skilled practice of your abilities should continue to guide

you as you progress in your career. Indeed, hopefully it is the performance of these tasks that gratifies you the most as an attorney.

Do not neglect your core skills, even as you are asked to prepare dog-and-pony shows for potential clients, the summer associate entertainment schedule, or any of the other extraneous tasks that are required of partners. They will stay with you no matter what twists and turns your career takes; take pleasure in their performance and do what you can to make them deeper and richer.

• **Start (or keep) having fun.** The guys who founded the Ben and Jerry’s ice cream brand (conveniently named “Ben” and “Jerry”) famously established, as their corporate motto, “If it’s not fun, why do it?” Not surprisingly, this principle is not likely to be embraced fully by most law firms. All lawyers worth their salt know that competent attorney work is based on a bedrock of detail-oriented preparation, which often means long hours and the occasional bit of drudgery, none of which are always “fun.”

Nevertheless, the question embedded in the motto is one that new partners should ponder. Part of what makes the sacrifices of being a good attorney worth it is not just a positive financial result or a “win” in court, but satisfaction from the performance of the tasks themselves. For myself, I doubt I could have written all of the thousands of discovery motions or memos I did en route to becoming a partner, if I did not like writing as a general matter. It is important for new partners to keep in mind the need to enjoy their practice, even at the times when vacations or holidays are far away and short deadlines and conference calls seem unending. Take pleasure in a solid performance—regardless of the outcome.

At bottom, becoming a partner is the next big step in what one hopes will prove to be a long career. If you can make it to your old age and still look forward to coming into the office, you will have successfully taken to heart my advice. (I hope I’m still alive then, and doing the same, so that you can thank me personally.)

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