

Articles

"Set Your Professional Boundaries"

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Let's face it, making partner isn't a science. If it were, every first-year associate who wanted it badly enough would ascend into the partnership, firms would lose all their leverage and chaos would reign. So we must accept the fact that partnership standards are subjective. They vary from firm to firm and, depending on the economy, they can change at an individual firm from year to year. Given that, how does a young, ambitious lawyer put himself or herself in the best possible position to be promoted to the hallowed halls of partnership?

I've already laid out in past columns the No. 1 path to law firm success, so I won't belabor that advice here. To summarize: Young lawyers should be obsessed with learning their craft, making each project their own and being the MVP of every team they're assigned to. Doing that not only puts you in the best possible position for making partner, but in the unfortunate event that you don't (for reasons beyond your control, of course), you're such a good lawyer that you can take your skills elsewhere and make a pretty good living anyway.

What I'd like to talk about here are boundaries. Not the kind your therapist talks about, but the kind we should all practice in our professional lives. The keyword here is "professional," a word that connotes all kinds of things. Professionals are taken seriously. They are usually paid quite well. Important people seek them out when they need help. In short, professionals have a better chance of making partner.

Along those lines, I'd like to address the importance of setting and respecting boundaries between your work life and your home life. Between the personal and the professional.

Before I'm upbraided for singling out women, let me point out that I've seen just as many men violating these guidelines as women. These are gender-blind observations.

- Your boss is, first and foremost, your boss. I know the two of you have played golf together. You've even double-dated with him and his wife and your kids have had play dates together. All those things are very nice, and it doesn't mean you don't have a genuine friendship. As someone who sincerely values the friendships I have with associates who work with me, I can attest that workplace friendships are good for everyone involved. But, at the end of the day, your boss is still your boss.

This means you still have to give him pristine work and accept criticism graciously. You still have to accept whatever assignment she gives you, even if it's 6 o'clock on a Friday night, without whining. Just because the two of you have become friends doesn't mean your boss doesn't call the shots anymore.

Clients and Friends

- Your client is, first and foremost, your client. This is even more important than the first one. And one that's sometimes more difficult to honor. After all, the money-changing part aside, clients usually treat their lawyers as peers, equals if you will. We take our clients to ballgames. We entertain them on the firm's dime. I consider myself extraordinarily fortunate that several of my clients are my closest friends. It's nice to work for people you like.

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That doesn't mean, however, that you can miss a deadline. And it doesn't mean you can complain to them about how busy you are, or let on that there are other client matters on your desk more important than theirs. Your clients should harbor the notion that they're the only people you work for.

- Your office isn't your living room. With so much attention being given lately to "family-friendly" work policies, the line between work and home can get blurred sometimes. But, for the sake of everyone around you, draw that line as clearly as you can. This is most relevant for people with children. I'm not saying that the world shouldn't know you're an involved father or a proud mother. And it doesn't mean that you can't display a few of your kids' drawings in the office or bring the tots to the office once in a while.

The trouble starts when "once in a while" turns into once a week, or more. Yes, there are times when child-care arrangements fall through, or you have to stay late the same night your husband or wife does. But if it starts happening more than every few weeks, it's time to start thinking of alternate arrangements. Even the most family-friendly firm doesn't want to look like a day-care center.

Along those lines, keep the baby gear at the workplace to a minimum. If Pack N' Plays and Exersaucers take up more space than law books and oak desks, you might want to scale it back a bit.

Maintaining a professional demeanor—with your boss, your clients, and in the office—can only improve your chances when The Firm is considering its partner candidates. Once you're there, then, and only then, can you bring your life-size Barney doll to the office.