

STATE BAR OF MICHIGAN | Master Lawyers Section

# WORDS OF WISDOM



Master Lawyers Speak Words of Wisdom



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The Master Lawyers Section Council conducted a survey of its members in March 2018 to gather their thoughts and feedback. The information will be used by the council to set its key priorities and activities for the next few years.

In addition to gathering key information, the survey asked members as experienced lawyers what words of wisdom they would share with a new lawyer. More than 650 respondents offered their thoughts on the following aspects of being a lawyer:

The Practice of Law

Stay True to Your Clients

Practice Ethically; Guard Your Reputation

Keep Up with the Changes in the Law

Take Care of Yourself and Your Family

Network to Create and Maintain Professional Relationships

The Business of the Law

Retirement Is on the Horizon. Really.

If You Find the Law Is Not for You

How to Enjoy the Journey

We hope you enjoy this compilation of the thoughts of lawyers looking back on their practice and sharing what they have learned over time. They range from specific advice such as “There is no substitute for preparation,” to the longer view “Relax. You will make mistakes. They’re not fatal,” to the ironic “Campbell’s Law: Nothing will ever happen on time in court unless you are not there.”

These words of wisdom are offered for your consideration by the members of the Master Lawyers Section.



## Contents

The Practice of Law .....	6
Stay True to Your Clients .....	8
Practice Ethically; Guard Your Reputation .....	11
Keep Up with the Changes in the Law. ....	13
Network to Create and Maintain Professional Relationships .....	17
The Business of the Law .....	18
Retirement Is on the Horizon. Really! .....	20
If You Find the Law Is Not for You .....	20
How to Enjoy the Journey .....	21

## The Practice of Law

Approach your practice of law in a scholarly manner. Treat all you meet with kindness and fairness. Be fearless but do not bludgeon your adversaries because you have the upper hand.



Civility is a first principle. You may dislike your opponent's client but you should interact with opposing counsel in a professional manner.



Engage in the practice area that you are passionate about and interested in. Keep learning in that chosen area. Share your knowledge with those coming up behind you.



Flexibility in approaching legal issues is highly beneficial.



Get to know five key people who would be good mentors and regularly stay in touch with them to hear their wisdom.



Participate in pro bono activities right away.



Master the facts, for out of the facts arises the law.



I hope you paid attention in Contracts, because it all comes down to whether there was a meeting of the minds.

## A List of Don'ts

Don't be afraid to take time at the beginning of a project to think it through before diving in. In the end, it saves time.



Don't cut corners; don't cut and paste; don't fudge the facts; provide analysis; respect your clients and the legal system; always carry yourself as a representative of the entire profession; family first; don't sweat the small stuff; have fun.



Don't procrastinate—if you don't know how to do it, ask for help. If help isn't available, give the project your best shot. Procrastinating just elongates the stress and pain.



Don't try to handle cases outside your usual area of practice.



Don't be afraid to push the envelope.



Don't be afraid to say “I don't know” to a client or judicial officer. Follow up with “I will find out.”



Don't be shy about asking technical “how to” questions to another attorney. I've been practicing forty years and I still do it. Always treat Court clerks with respect. If they say you're doing it wrong—you are. Be a vigorous advocate for your client, but recognize that the other side does not think of themselves a villain. You can use this to your advantage.

If possible, associate with a large firm for at least two years to gain wide experience; then relocate to a smaller firm (or solo practice) to excel at your specialty.



Identify the question first and find the answer later. Know the court rules. Return your phone calls. Don't fib—not even “little white lies.”



Listen to your clients, listen to the judge, and listen to opposing counsel before you speak or pontificate and you will be heard.



Research all legal matters thoroughly—and perhaps discuss with other practicing attorneys—prior to rendering advice or preparing legal documentation of any kind.



Step back from a seeming calamity and remember that any problem can be managed if you have been honest and ethical.



Try to accomplish an equitable settlement of disputes whenever possible so everyone feels he won something.



The basics still remain the same: Be prepared, aware, ethical, and energetic, and you can succeed even though the profession has changed.

**Work hard. Keep your mouth shut. Listen. Listen. Listen.  
And good things will happen.**



**You will win some you should lose. You will lose some you  
should win. The rest you will split 50-50.**



**Campbell's Law: Nothing will ever happen on time in court  
unless you are not there.**



**Do not work on a matter until you think it is good enough.  
Work on it until it is right.**



**Preparation is 9/10 of the law; the other tenth is  
listening to your client.**



**To effectively represent business clients, you have to know  
almost as much about their business as they do.**

## **Stay True to Your Clients**

**Work hard on behalf of your clients and treat opposing  
counsel and their clients with respect and civility.**



**Be honest with clients and other attorneys. Do not raise  
clients' expectations beyond what is reasonable  
and rational relative to their case.**

Learn to recognize problem clients before they retain you. Never think you are all that wise; listen to the client carefully; keep the client fully informed; and place great weight on what the client describes as her/his goals.



Take nothing for granted. Your first responsibility is always the best interest of your client.



Treat your clients like you are the one on the other side of the desk.



Focus on client service.

## Practice Ethically; Guard Your Reputation

Always treat others with respect; however, don't tolerate disrespect. Give the other person a chance to act more civilly; if he doesn't, walk away or otherwise disengage.



Appreciate and respect the privilege you have achieved.



Remember a lifetime of building a reputation can be undone with one bad decision. No client pressure can justify unethical conduct.



Be professional, but also be human.

Establish and safeguard your reputation for honesty,  
integrity and professionalism.



Integrity is key. Keep your word. Practice ethically.



Pursue justice rather than victory.



Reread the Lawyer's Oath from time to time  
and take it to heart.



Stay ethically aware. Save for retirement NOW.



Constantly (re-) invest in your marriage and family.



Your reputation follows you around your whole career:  
take care to foster and preserve it.



Your reputation is your most important asset.



It is a profession, not a business. The client's needs do not  
supersede the obligation to ethical standards  
and professional responsibility.



Work to upgrade the public image of the profession.

## Keep Up with the Changes in the Law

Always increase your knowledge, stay current with your field of practice, and update your processes.



Clients come and go, but the legal community will always be there and judge you on your ethics and legal knowledge.



Read the oath every Monday morning.



Continue to improve your understanding of the law in areas that are not your area of expertise—you never know when it may benefit you.



Even random, seemingly unrelated opportunities provide a beneficial framework for broader insights and experience as you continue down your path.



Focus on engagement in your chosen area of the law. Be active in that section of the Bar.



Invest in yourself. Never let your current job or employer limit your continuing education or the scope of your knowledge.



Keep up with the latest caselaw.

**Know** not only what the law is, but how to make our laws better to serve society.



**Law** is not a 9-to-5 job. It is a profession that requires continuing education, including reading legal articles to make sure you are constantly keeping up on new legislation and caselaw.



**Learning** should not stop after the bar exam. Maintain a spirit of learning and focus more on listening than speaking.



**Read** the advance sheets. Learn and use Casemaker.



**Serving** as a military JAG is a great way to serve your country and obtain valuable legal experience prior to settling into a job for the long haul.



**To practice** honorably become technologically proficient if you're not already.



**Your education** has just begun; learn everything you can about client communication; recognize that clients are not lawyers and need to have all matters explained in easy-to-understand terms.



**Take care** of yourself and your family.

Enjoy your law practice, your clients, and your colleagues.  
With all of that in mind, put your family first.



**‘Beloved husband and father’** is a better epitaph than  
**‘He worked 70 hours a week and became a  
major partner in his firm.’**



**Be open to possibilities.**



**Be prepared for change.**



**Create your practice to fit your life instead of trying to fit  
your life around your practice.**



**Do not let your job define you.**

**Don’t neglect your family, even if you have to quit jobs with  
big firms; you didn’t marry a firm, and the firm isn’t more  
important than your spouse and kids.**



**Find a practice area and group that you enjoy.  
Don’t subordinate personal fulfillment to  
chasing dollars or partnerships.**



**Focus on timely and vigorously serving clients, but don’t lose  
yourself when serving your clients or your practice.**

**It is easy to practice law. It is extremely difficult to practice law at a consistent level of excellence. Plan your life in a way that the practice of law does not become all-consuming and you don't miss out on all the important things.**



**It's a long journey; don't rush. Take time for yourself and your family.**



**Learn to enjoy what you do.**



**Learn to get out of your box. Evolve or you will struggle to succeed.**



**Love what you do or find another career. The practice of law has changed dramatically and for those who are only in it for money, it has become much more difficult.**



**Never become desperate—for clients, income, success. Desperate people make bad decisions.**



**Pick an area of the law that makes you feel good about what you are doing.**



**Put your clients' interest first. Don't put making a lot of money as your primary goal. Enjoy life and have a few laughs each day. Set aside some time each week for yourself.**

Strike a work/life balance for the long term.



There will be days in your career when you will ask yourself why you pursued a career in law. When you have those occasional days keep them in perspective; they will be far outnumbered by the days when you realize you could not have made a better choice of profession than the law.

## Network to Create and Maintain Professional Relationships

Be professional and be courteous to your fellow lawyers.



I wish I knew earlier in my career how rewarding personally and professionally it is to serve on nonprofit boards and as volunteer general counsel for nonprofits.



Join groups, special interest bars, or other avenues to meet other lawyers. Keep an open mind toward areas of law you are not familiar with.



Networking and being active in bar activities are as important to your practice as staying current in your practice areas.



Stay connected.

Join young lawyers' groups to meet others your own age—  
they will follow you throughout your career.

## The Business of the Law

Although this is an honorable profession, it is still a for-profit  
business. Learn to balance the competing imperatives.



Don't let anyone tell you there are no jobs for new lawyers.  
Appreciate that, for better or for worse,  
the practice of law is now a business.



Be prepared for your income to fluctuate more  
than you would anticipate.



Be selective in accepting clients—you can do the work and  
not get paid or not do the work and not get paid.



This is a grind-it-out business. You won't work only 35–40  
hours/week and have weeks off at Christmas.



Do what you get paid to do, like any other profession.



Get the money up front.

**Have a plan—the plan may change with some frequency,  
but have a plan.**



**Learn how to investigate and gather facts. Learn how to hire  
and cooperate with top investigators.**



**Learn how to market yourself; learn to code; understand  
the importance of personal relationships and integrity;  
understand your clients.**



**Only take on the number of cases you can handle  
efficiently and effectively.**



**Our profession is now a business and you need to run it like  
one or you will not survive. Do not overcharge or  
run up billable hours, but get paid for the work  
you do. Provide honest and genuine assistance,  
and you will build an excellent reputation.**



**Seek economic security, not wealth.**



**Develop a client base that perpetuates itself.**

## **Retirement Is on the Horizon. Really!**

It goes by faster than you think. Plan for retirement and make friends with some younger folks.



Invest so your money works for you instead of you working for your money.



Obtain disability insurance at an early age.



Save and invest your earnings.



Start planning for retirement or slowing down as soon as you pass the bar.



Think about an exit strategy as early as possible. Your path will change, but if you don't know what the endgame is, the path will control you instead of you choosing the path.

## **If You Find the Law Is Not for You**

Be open to new experiences and alternative paths.  
Do something you love.



Find a way to use your law degree without practicing law.

If practicing law doesn't work for you, don't be afraid to explore other possibilities.



If you don't have a burning love for the law, find another passion; there are many easier ways to make a living.



If you don't wake up in the morning desiring to go to work each and every day, change what you're doing.



Learn everything you can. You may end up in a field different from your original plan.



A law degree offers options beyond traditional legal careers.



There is nothing worse than spending your life, of which you have one, doing what you don't enjoy.

## How to Enjoy the Journey

Don't take yourself seriously, but take what you do for your clients seriously.



Enjoy every minute and learn all you can; it goes by quickly!



Get real world experience.

**Do** all that you can in life while you are able to do it—  
ski the black diamond at least once!



**H**ave as much fun as you can.



**Keep** the faith, keep learning, and keep moving forward.



**M**aintain a sense of humor.



**Most** of the things you need to remember you learned in  
kindergarten: be fair, be honest, and do good work.



**Relax.** You will make mistakes. They're not fatal.



**Shine** your shoes and always be early.



**Stay** focused, work, and enjoy the practice of law.



**There** is more to life than the law.



**Work** hard, don't get too full of yourself and don't make  
money the most important part of life. Have fun and laugh  
whenever you can.

**B**e technically proficient and ethically responsible,  
but also be a critical and commonsense thinker.



**T**reat all with civility and cooperation. Your career is a long  
road and your reputation among your peers and the judiciary  
will influence the outcomes of your practice.



**R**eturn your phone calls.



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