

What Makes a Great Lawyer

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Back in February, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* contained a supplement, “Philadelphia’s Best Lawyers 2009,” a local directory from Best Lawyers in America. I am usually suspect of such lawyer listings packaged with glossy photos, and have heard the complaints that the same faces are always included and the results are driven by public relations campaigns.

Best Lawyers explained that lawyers “are not able to buy their way into this guide” but rather, must earn a spot from peers in their practice areas. Lawyers are “urged to use only their highest standards” when voting and asked to use this guideline: “If you had a close friend or relative who needed a real estate lawyer (for example), and you could not handle the case yourself, to whom would you refer them?”

I call that standard “a lawyers’ lawyer” — the kind of lawyer another calls for help or would recommend to a loved one, the kind of lawyer other lawyers respect.

I decided to reach out to a handful of Philly lawyers’ lawyers and ask them for their advice. Since I had a limited amount of space for this column, I couldn’t contact all of them and instead, e-mailed those who I thought would recognize my name and not think I was spamming them. I asked them to tell me, “What makes a lawyer great?”

Below are the replies, with several consistent themes from Philly’s lawyers’ lawyers.

Barry Abelson, a deal lawyers’ lawyer and one of the cornerstones of [Pepper Hamilton](#)’s commercial department, was one of the first to reply. “Never take your knowledge base and experience for granted — constantly enhance and refine each. Never take your clients for granted — constantly keep them top of mind, and focus on adding value as they, not you, define it. Never take your colleagues for granted — none of us can do this alone and it wouldn’t be half as much fun if we could.” Best Lawyers named Abelson one of the individual “Lawyers of the Year,” based on his “particularly high level of peer recognition.”

Each of those who replied have a high level of peer recognition, including Mark Aronchick, named shareholder and one of the leading litigators at [Hangley Aronchick Segal & Pudlin](#). Aronchick counseled: “Great lawyers are people who know how to keep everything that is important about life in a proper balance. Never forget, and always expand upon, the passions you had before you became a lawyer. Be curious, always. Work wholeheartedly and with all of your energy on whatever it is that is in front of you because good things always will follow. Take risks. Listen well.” Aronchick led the Philadelphia Bar Association as its chancellor in 1988.

Another former bar chancellor and nationally known litigator is appellate and civil rights lawyer Andre; Denis, a partner at [Stradley Ronon Stevens & Young](#) . Denis said lawyers need to “remember that your client is there for your advice and judgment. Pay attention to every detail, and don’t always rely on your initial analysis — challenge yourself.” He reminded lawyers to “act vigorously, but treat your adversary with civility.”

I heard from yet another former bar association chancellor, Francis P. Devine III, who co-chairs Pepper Hamilton’s litigation department. Devine is not just a lawyers’ lawyer, but a “leaders’ leader,” having presided over just about every legal organization he ever joined. Devine advised: “The best lawyers recognize, and never forget, that their eyes and ears are much more important faculties than their mouth. Observe more, listen better, talk less.” This is not the first time he has counseled me to keep my mouth shut.

The company you keep is also important, according to [Thomas R. Kline](#) , who tops almost every list of lawyers and not just local ones. Kline garnered yet another cover with this year’s Best Lawyers supplement, which heralded him as “Philadelphia’s Personal Injury Litigator of the Year.”

Kline counseled, “To become a great lawyer you should surround yourself with great lawyers.” He explained: “I was fortunate to be a law clerk for an icon justice, the late Tom Pomeroy; had a mentor, the legendary Jim Beasley; and then a great lawyer as a law partner, Shanin Specter. And, if possible, add the grounding of a wonderful family or people who love you. The better those around you are, the better lawyer you’ll be.” Who wouldn’t want to hang out with that guy?

Another lawyer who often appears on great lawyers lists is Roberta Liebenberg, noted by *The Legal Intelligencer* affiliate *The National Law Journal* as one of the “50 Most Influential Women Lawyers in America.” Liebenberg, a litigator and partner from [Fine Kaplan & Black](#) , recommended: “Identify a niche that you find interesting and become as knowledgeable and visible as possible. Affirmatively seek out partners and assignments in that particular area, and write articles and speak about it so you will get noticed and develop a book of business.”

S. Gerald Litvin is someone who found such a niche. Litvin, a dean of the plaintiffs bar, now spends his time as senior counsel, training and consulting with [Morgan Lewis & Bockius](#) ‘ lawyers. He responded: “If a lawyer diligently applies him or herself to the client’s legitimate interests and eschews intellectual arrogance — i.e., never treats any matter routinely but, instead, gives each situation the total respect and fresh attention it deserves — reputation and success will take care of themselves. Of course, a little luck wouldn’t hurt!” I first became a fan of Litvin when he was my trial advocacy instructor at Temple Law and still call him “professor.”

The former bar association chancellors were willing with words of wisdom and several even offered to take over my entire column for me — and not just for this month! I asked former Chancellor David H. Marion to guest write my column about eight years ago and he produced “Five Steps to Happiness” (and still welcomes calls for copies).

Here is the latest from Marion, a veteran litigator and former chairman of [Montgomery McCracken Walker & Rhoads](#) : “Organize your time and prioritize your activities; prepare carefully and thoroughly for every appearance and meeting; adopt an attitude of cheerfulness, optimism, flexibility and confidence without arrogance.”

No one could ever accuse Gerald A. McHugh of arrogance. A partner at [Raynes McCarty](#) , McHugh is another perennial on the best lawyer lists and is known as much for his charitable work as he is for being a “trial lawyers’ lawyer.” He advised, “A relentless dedication to the craft of lawyering is essential. There is a reason we call it the ‘practice’ of law.”

Also on the former chancellor hit parade were these lessons from Abraham C. Reich, co-chairman of [Fox Rothschild](#) . “The best lawyers I know work hard, show respect to their opponents, concede points that should be conceded, and do not take themselves too seriously,” Reich wrote. He added, “While confidence is key, a healthy dose of modesty goes a long way to achieving the necessary balance for professional excellence.”

And speaking of professional excellence, I was particularly delighted to hear from Jerome J. Shestack, former president of the American Bar Association, a leader in the international human rights movement and counsel at [Wolf Block](#) . Shestack is a legendary lawyer and I love to listen to and read his words. He kept it simple, but caught me completely with, “Immerse yourself in the law with all the passion of a first love and make it enduring.”

Dennis R. Suplee, who garnered the Best Lawyers’ “2009 Philadelphia Lawyer of the Year for Bet-the-Company Litigation,” noted the commitment needed. “You have to care enough to allow the case to take over your life,” he said. “And then, when that case ends, you have to allow the next one to do the same.” Suplee, a partner and former chairman of [Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis](#) , taught many of us to take depositions with his books and courses.

One great lawyer hand delivered his advice to me, although he only had to walk down the hall. Joseph A. Tate, a partner at [Dechert](#) , is known nationally as a leading lawyer for antitrust and commercial litigation. Tate advised that to be the best you can be in all that you do, you need to “listen, think and be truthful.”

Tate explained, “Listen with your ears, eyes and all of your senses, to the words said, to the speaker’s body language, to what is not said, and to your inner self.”

He continued: “Think about what your senses heard and saw. Evaluate and analyze before you speak and formulate a seasoned and measured response. Don’t just speak because you want to hear yourself or say what you think the listener wants to hear. Be true to yourself (and your audience) by relying on your education, experience, your common sense and your inner self. If you build a reputation for truth, reliability and credibility and act accordingly, you will be all that you can be.”

In addition to Kline, Abelson and Suplee, the Best Lawyers supplement also singled out Cheryl Young and proclaimed her the best family lawyer in town. Young, another partner at Hangley Aronchick, shared: “I believe the best lawyers are those who truly have a passion for what they do. This is still a profession, and not merely a job. Enthusiasm, caring and true investment in what we do is reflected in the outcome of our cases, in the respect of our colleagues and in appreciation from our clients.”

Although there are thousands of other lawyers in this city who are great, I think those who offered their advice are very special indeed. They are lawyers’ lawyers, and I hope you find their advice as inspirational as I do.

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