

The Importance of “Ship” Building in the Legal Profession

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At the heart of the Colorado Bar Association is relationship. As captured in our vision statement, the CBA provides members “a community within which to build relationships.” Every lawyer’s practice depends on the opportunity to meet, know, and work collectively with a community of lawyers beyond the walls of their own office. In fact, it’s how we truly participate in the profession of law. The relationships we form in the bar are the vehicles that enable us to engage in the activities that make the practice of law more than just a job.

Relationships are about more than just referrals, business development, and professional advancement. They’re about well-being and belonging. We know that people with a close friend at work are much more likely to be engaged and productive.¹ Despite the container the bar provides for lawyers to build relationships, several aspects of our current environment make relationship building more difficult, including the competitiveness of the legal profession, the hybrid nature of today’s workforce, and the enduring challenges of inclusion. Overcoming these obstacles to find connection takes time, work, and strategy. It requires lawyers to be “ship” builders in their professional lives.

What is “Ship” Building?

“Ship” building is the process by which we build various “ships” in our community: friendship, partnership, sportsmanship, citizenship, collegueship, kinship, mentorship, sponsorship, stewardship, and fellowship, to name a few. Think about your personal and professional life. Where and how do you build your ships?

As I watch the lawyers of my generation come into practice and begin to take on leadership positions in the profession, I can’t help but wonder if operating in a world of virtual reality has left many of us unable (or unwilling) to master the “ship” building techniques of prior generations.

I’m a millennial. I started using AOL instant messenger when I was 13. My high school teachers delivered assignments via e-mail. I connected with my law school classmates via MySpace. I don’t even have to call my parents anymore because we’re Facebook friends. My generation grew up developing relationships behind a screen through profile pics, avatars, and emojis. As I watch the lawyers of my generation come into practice and begin to take on leadership positions in the profession, I can’t

help but wonder if operating in a world of virtual reality has left many of us unable (or unwilling) to master the “ship” building techniques of prior generations.

People are the Best “Ship” Builders

The interesting thing about actual ship building is that although the entire ship can be built via computer drawings and 3D printing, the only way to truly know if the ship will float is for a human to put it in water and watch it float or sink. The same is true for the ships we create in our daily lives. Sure, we can build our friendships, mentorships, and partnerships from behind a screen. But to truly make these ships work, we must physically show up to plug the holes, empty the bilge, and trim the sails. Far too often we forget that “ship” building requires human interaction. Virtual ships can only take us so far.

Of course, plenty of great relationships are formed virtually. During the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us came together over Zoom to share in the universal trauma of the moment. But problems start to develop when we rely too heavily on this technology and use it to avoid confrontation and perpetuate incivility. It’s much more difficult to treat people unkindly when you’re invested in them to help make your ship float. As Michelle Obama says, “it’s harder to hate up close.”

Additionally, no relationship exists for a single person only. When you build a ship, you build it as much for others as you do for yourself. Improving the culture of the legal community requires us all to invest in the practice of ship building. Engaging in the art of showing up to build friendship, relationship, and fellowship with other Colorado lawyers allows each of us to create the professional climate we aspire to achieve.

Ship Building with Difficult People

The reality of life is that we sometimes must work with people we don’t like. As lawyers, we must navigate professional relationships with colleagues in our organization, clients, opposing counsel, and judges. Odds are you’re not going to get along with all of them. The adversarial nature of our profession makes it even more likely that at some point in your career you’ll have to

ship build with someone you simply don’t like. So how can we successfully build relationships with the difficult people we encounter?

Look in the Mirror

No one is perfect. Take a moment to reflect on yourself. Perhaps what you don’t like in another person is something you also struggle with yourself. Understanding where your frustration comes from can help diminish its power over you and open a door to relationship.

You aren’t a bad person for not liking someone, and the other person is (probably) not inherently terrible. Acknowledge the situation for what it is and avoid the emotional power struggle that so often arises in moments of conflict.

Don’t Judge Yourself... or Them

Things are never as good or as bad as they seem. You aren’t a bad person for not liking someone, and the other person is (probably) not inherently terrible. Acknowledge the situation for what it is and avoid the emotional power struggle that so often arises in moments of conflict. You have permission not to like everyone you encounter.

Set Appropriate Boundaries

Sometimes it isn’t the person we don’t like—it’s a character trait. When dealing with especial-

ly negative people or habitual complainers, it’s important to set limits on your role in the dynamic. Distance yourself by redirecting the conversation toward positive solutions and opportunities for collaboration.


Practice Your Poker Face

Learn to cultivate diplomacy—this is key in learning to treat all people with civility and politeness. It doesn’t mean you have to agree with someone you dislike or go along with what they say. You just need to maintain a consistent level of decorum when interacting with them. Be soft on the person but firm on the issue. This means that you focus on the issues that need to be corrected rather than attack someone personally. Don’t let your emotions get the best of you or allow yourself to be consumed by the situation. You can choose to rise above the chaos by focusing on facts and rational responses.

Stay Curious and Try a Little Empathy

Difficult people are often the way they are because of themselves, not because of you. Everyone is fighting a battle we often cannot see. Have some empathy for this person and the circumstances in their lives that contribute to their frustrating behavior.

Conclusion

The relational agility that comes from seeing oneself as a “ship” builder allows us not only to create new relationships but also to respond to relationship breakdowns and navigate relationships with difficult people. We are all empowered to build positive relationships with our peers and colleagues. Take some time to evaluate your ship building skills. Are you showing up to maintain the ships you’ve created? Are you recognizing opportunities to work with others to build ships in the community? After all, the strength of our community lies in the strength of the connections we have with each other. 

NOTE

1. See, e.g., Patel and Plowman, “The Increasing Importance of a Best Friend at Work” (Aug. 17, 2022), <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/397058/increasing-importance-best-friend-work.aspx>.