



It Takes a Community

Effective Tools for Self-Preservation

BY CATHERINE CHAN



An attorney's life can include copious doses of negative emotions. It's a people field, filled with individuals who are paid to argue.

It's a public field, filled with the landmines that publicity can entail. And it can be a punishing field, filled with "winners" and, by extension, "losers."

Attorneys may correlate their self-worth to their reputation in the profession. Maybe for this reason, attorneys are particularly loath to "losing." Attorneys may be motivated to evade failure of any kind, always. This elusive fantasy can result in a general inability to accept constructive criticism, observe decorum, or prepare for the inevitable calamities inherent in life.

Provocation can occur quickly and without notice. A friendly coworker may suddenly become cruelly critical. A client or a superior may pen a devastating review. A decision-maker may deliver a scathing denial to a legal argument. An anticipated salary increase, or title upgrade, may be withheld. Opposing counsel, or decision-makers, may be dismissive, belligerent, pugnacious, or bellicose.

Attorneys face potential torrents of torment that can negatively affect their self-worth within

the profession. Whether the perceived attacks are constant or isolated, attorneys must arm themselves with tools for self-preservation.

Key Concepts for Self-Preservation

One survival tool that I frequently recommend to my colleagues is the Harvard Business Review's 2010 publication *HBR's 10 Must Reads: On Managing Yourself*.¹ In this iteration of the popular series, 16 contributors offer a host of self-management insights that are particularly relevant to overworked and overstressed professionals like attorneys. The following is my summary of some of the book's key concepts, along with excerpts that expand on these concepts.

1. Set a standard by which to measure your life.

Three questions that everyone should ask themselves are: "How can I be happy in my career? How can I be sure that my relationship with my family is an enduring source of happiness? And how can I live my life with integrity?"² The answer to the first question "comes from Frederick Herzberg's assertion that the most powerful motivator isn't money; it's the opportunity to learn, grow in responsibilities, contribute, and be recognized."³ As to

the second question: "People who are driven to excel have this unconscious propensity to underestimate their families and over-invest in their careers—even though intimate and loving relationships with their families are the most powerful and enduring source of happiness."⁴ And finally, regarding the third question: Exercise humility, and don't fall prey to a "just this once" deviation from your principles. "Don't worry about the level of individual prominence you have achieved; worry about the individuals you have helped become better people."⁵

2. Make the investment to study yourself, to help yourself.

"We will have to place ourselves where we can make the greatest contribution. And we will have to stay mentally alert and engaged during a 50-year working life, which means knowing how and when to change the work we do."⁶ To be our own CEO, we'll "need to cultivate a deep understanding" of ourselves.⁷ "What are your most valuable strengths and most dangerous weaknesses? Equally important, how do you learn and work with others? What are your most deeply held values? And in what type of work environment can you make the greatest contribution?"⁸

3. Don't panic when failure arrives.

"Why do some people suffer real hardships and not falter?"⁹ Resilience is one answer: "Resilient people possess three defining characteristics: They coolly accept the harsh realities facing them. They find meaning in terrible times. And they have an uncanny ability to improvise, making do with whatever's at hand."¹⁰

4. Remembering to fill your cup will boost your capacity and your performance.

"Longer days at the office don't work because time is a limited resource. But personal energy is renewable. . . . By fostering deceptively simple rituals that help employees regularly replenish their energy, organizations build workers' physical, emotional, and mental resilience. These rituals include taking brief breaks at specific intervals, reducing interruptions, and spending more time on activities people do best and enjoy most."¹¹

5. Beware of the newly recognized neurological phenomenon called “attention deficit trait” (ADT).

“Marked by distractibility, inner frenzy, and impatience, ADT prevents managers from clarifying priorities, making smart decisions, and managing time. This insidious condition turns otherwise talented performers into harried underachievers. . . . How to control ADT’s ravaging impact on performance? Foster positive emotions by connecting face-to-face with people you like throughout the day. Take physical care of your brain by getting enough sleep, eating healthfully, and exercising regularly. Organize for ADT, designating part of each day for thinking and planning, and setting up your office to foster mental functioning (for example, keeping part of your desk clear at all times).”¹²

6. Improving your leadership skills can mitigate a range of problems.

Leadership includes “creating sustainable change to benefit not just you but the most important people around you.”¹³ “The Total Leadership concept rests on three principles:

- Be real: Act with authenticity by clarifying what’s important.
- Be whole: Act with integrity by respecting the whole person.
- Be innovative: Act with creativity by experimenting with how things get done.”¹⁴

7. Understand and live according to your fundamental values.

The “fundamental state of leadership” is “the way you lead when a crisis forces you to tap into your deepest values and instincts. In this state, you instinctively know what to do: You rise to the occasion and perform your best. Fortunately, you don’t need a crisis to shift into the fundamental state of leadership. You can do so at any time . . . by asking four questions:

- **Am I results centered?** Have you articulated the result you want to create?
- **Am I internally directed?** Are you willing to challenge others’ expectations?
- **Am I other focused?** Have you put your organization’s needs above your own?
- **Am I externally open?** Do you recognize signals suggesting the need for change?”¹⁵

8. Candidly check in with yourself.

“[F]igure out how you’re *really* doing . . . by looking to *yourself* for answers. Regularly ask yourself questions like these: ‘Am I communicating a vision for my [business or life goals]?’ ‘Am I spending my time in ways that enable me to achieve my priorities?’ ‘Do I give people timely and direct feedback they can act on?’ ‘How do I behave under pressure?’”¹⁶

9. Your emotional intelligence affects your life and the lives of those around you.

“[M]ood contagion is a real neurological phenomenon The most effective executives display moods and behaviors that match the situation at hand, with a healthy dose of optimism mixed in. They respect how other people are feeling—even if it is glum or defeated—but they also model what it looks like to move forward with hope and humor.”¹⁷ The four components of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.¹⁸

Integrity as a Guidepost

The concepts above are not exhaustive, yet they are illuminating. No one can be reasonably expected to always deliver perfectly on all fronts. Attorneys must become more comfortable with criticisms, challenges, and failures. Integrity includes cultivating skills and maturity for the worst circumstances, as much as anything else. Both “winners” and “losers” are entitled to professionalism and decorum.

Additional Tools: Loving-Kindness and Community

The renowned Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön wrote, “The people who give themselves such a hard time come in all ages, shapes, and colors. The thing they have in common is that they have no loving-kindness for themselves.”¹⁹ “If we’re willing to give up hope that insecurity and pain can be exterminated, then we can have the courage to relax with the groundlessness of our situation. This is the first step on the path.”²⁰

Attorneys owe themselves loving-kindness especially in the most difficult times, when their profession challenges their very identity. Community is a bridge to fellow sufferers, fellow

leaders, fellow winners, and fellow losers. Community provides the strong shoulders of mentors and free, albeit unlicensed, “therapists.” Our peers know our suffering and need us for their success and survival at the same measure we need them.

In uncertain times, especially, the bonds of community can heal and protect us. In confident times, these bonds celebrate and promote us. We optimize our self-growth, and our social and emotional intelligence, in strong and healthy communities. Attorneys should reach for community, set and expect standards for decorum and safety for themselves and amongst their peers, and steel themselves for those days that test our perseverance. **CL**

NOTES

1. *HBR’s 10 Must Reads: On Managing Yourself* (Harvard Business Review 2010) (hereinafter, *On Managing Yourself*).
2. Christensen, “How Will You Measure Your Life?,” in *On Managing Yourself*, *supra* note 1 at 3.
3. *Id.*
4. *Id.* at 8.
5. *Id.* at 12.
6. Drucker, “Managing Oneself,” in *On Managing Yourself*, *supra* note 1 at 13.
7. *Id.* at 15.
8. *Id.*
9. Coutu, “How Resilience Works,” in *On Managing Yourself*, *supra* note 1 at 47.
10. *Id.* at 49.
11. Schwartz and McCarthy, “Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time,” in *On Managing Yourself*, *supra* note 1 at 63.
12. Hallowell, “Overloaded Circuits,” in *On Managing Yourself*, *supra* note 1 at 81.
13. Friedman, “Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life,” in *On Managing Yourself*, *supra* note 1 at 97.
14. *Id.* at 100.
15. Quinn, “Moments of Greatness,” in *On Managing Yourself*, *supra* note 1 at 128–29.
16. Kaplan, “What to Ask the Person in the Mirror?,” in *On Managing Yourself*, *supra* note 1 at 150–51.
17. Goleman and Mckee, “Primal Leadership,” in *On Managing Yourself*, *supra* note 1 at 177–78.
18. *Id.*
19. Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* 25 (Shambhala Classics 2000).
20. *Id.* at 38.