



Core Competencies: Affiliation and Association

By Robert A. Creo

Previous columns have addressed the lawyer's reputation, self-awareness, professional growth, the art of persuasion, navigating emotions and the importance of perpetual learning. The current series explores the importance of soft skills and the development of core competencies involved in decision-making and effective client representation, including the science and the nuts and bolts of lawyer wellness, competency and contentment. This column speaks to the benefits of affiliation, association and engagement with your peers in the legal community.

Man is a social being, and it is, for aught I know, one of the worst punishments to be excluded from society.

— Benjamin Franklin

To Join or Not to Join, That is the Question!

Decades ago, when I was to present at a conference in New York City, I submitted my curriculum vitae, which included a list of all of my memberships in professional societies and associations, to the organizers. The panel moderator, a much older lawyer, introduced me by saying, "He is a joiner. He is in lots of groups and looks pretty active." That was it. My immediate but unexpressed sentiment was to take offense. What flashed through my mind was the story about famed trial lawyer Gerry Spence being introduced at a lawyer function in Philadelphia. The moderator said that he was "a man who needs no introduction," and turned to Spence, who did not rise from his seat. Instead, he exclaimed that he would begin speaking after a "proper introduction" to the audience. After an uncomfortable silence, a young lawyer rose from the crowd, walked to the podium and delivered an elegant and comprehensive bio of Mr. Spence. Recalling this story at that time was not a good thought for me since I was certain no one would step forth to sing my praise. So I simply smiled and began my presentation.

Recently I realized that what I had taken as a slur was the opposite. My activity in professional groups was a testament to my engagement in my work and career. My friendships and the commu-



nities that supported me often arose from my joiners. My identity and achievements were inherently linked to my professional affiliations. I joined. I saw. I learned. I became.

In this recent series of columns, themed "Core Competencies," I have attempted to identify and label from the voluminous research on workplace contentment and competency, the factors that contribute to professional wellness and peak performance. There is no doubt that for lawyers, what I have labeled "Affiliation and Association" is a core competency. Although there may be many lawyers who earn a good living going it alone and not participating in any activity beyond delivering compensable lawyer services to clients, I have grave doubts that they are achieving either peak performance or happiness. They may be very effective, but, by not engaging with the legal community, they are missing out on the fulfillment of being a lawyer.



Connectedness

The late Professor Derrick Bell contended that advancing relationships promotes lawyer ethical ambition, decision-making and well-being. He asserted that what binds us is not blood, marriage license or formal commitment, but pleasure, caring and the trust that ethical behavior has earned. Social science research supports this viewpoint. This dynamic is often framed as “connectedness” or “sense of belonging” and is critical to self-esteem and identity. It thrives from having supportive personal and professional relationships, including mentors and inspiring leadership.

In his groundbreaking studies of lawyers, Randall Kiser frequently addresses the concept of connectedness for lawyers. He defines it as “the quality of understanding and being linked to people and the ways in which they work, learn, socialize, play,

celebrate, observe, love and rest. The quality of connectedness underpins our judgments about a person’s credibility, trustworthiness, maturity, charisma and judgment and is expressed in common terms like ‘grounded,’ ‘centered,’ ‘worldly,’ ‘plugged in’ and ‘real.’ People who lack connectedness may be considered clever but never wise ...” He concludes that it is a “distinct, palpable skill” that enhances the judgment and decision-making capabilities of lawyers. My own experience confirms this characteristic as being a core competency for both peak performance and happiness. More importantly, it is learnable, and there are concrete and simple ways to act to build attitudes and habits to make connectedness an integral aspect of your work style.

Affiliating

I believe Franklin’s observation applies to the legal community, where I find there are lawyers who purposely impose a self-exile from the activities of the profession. My experience leads me to assert that when lawyers are disconnected from the profession and legal community, it is by their own ill-informed choice.

After I graduated law school, my first job was in Pittsburgh as the second lawyer in a corporate law department. It was just me and the general counsel. Since I did not go to either college or law school in Pittsburgh, I did not know anyone in the legal community there. I felt isolated professionally. Wisely, the Allegheny County Bar Association (ACBA) provided free membership to new lawyers. I joined. Their publications and flyers arrived on a daily basis. The hand-delivered legal journal was packed with information. There was a lot going on!

My boss approved my attendance at any educational presentation, so I started going to everything, understanding that in-house corporate counsel had to be knowledgeable in so many substantive areas of the law.

I found that even senior lawyers seemed eager to meet me and get to know me by buying me lunch. Of course, I was a little naive because often they were seeking a way to obtain work from my company. Still, at times there really is a free lunch. I started to feel like a lawyer who was going to belong to the Pittsburgh legal profession.

A real breakthrough for me came when the legal journal announced that the ACBA softball league was open to individual attorneys, who would be placed on an existing team that was short of players. I called (how refreshing it was to not have online signups only) and was placed on a team organized by Joe Fricker, an assistant solicitor in the City of Pittsburgh law department. He mustered together a team, Fricker’s Slickers, of young lawyers like me who worked in small firms or legal departments. I met over a dozen new lawyers during our once or twice weekly games, which were followed by mandatory pub stops. Professional and personal relationships flourished, and most of them continue today. Over a half-dozen marriages arose from the connections made via those softball and pub activities. There are dozens of descendants of City Slickers! When I went into my solo practice, I shared space with Joe Fricker in his private practice on Grant Street. We worked on cases together. After Joe retired from softball, I ran the team as the City Slickers for over a decade, including for the seven-year period when we never won a game.

There were other ways to connect within the legal community. When I shared space with Joe Fricker, it was during my apprenticeship with labor arbitrator Samuel Krimly, a senior practitioner in his 70s. Daily there was a table reserved at Kline’s Seafood House on Fourth Avenue for lawyers to lunch together. Sam was a regular, and thus I had the privilege of listening to his group of senior lawyers and judges. Being around judges made me less anxious and more confident going to court, even



Being around judges made me less anxious and more confident going to court, even though I did not appreciate at the time how important it was to be engaged within the legal community.

though I did not appreciate at the time how important it was to be engaged within the legal community.

My participation in the American, Pennsylvania and Allegheny County bar associations has been at the core of my professional engagement as a lawyer. I joined many other professional organizations and attended CLE and other educational conferences that have proven to be invaluable for the enhancement of substantive knowledge, networking for business and creating deep friendships. I co-founded the International Academy of Mediators and Mediators Beyond Borders International and served as an officer in both organizations. I still go to ACBA happy hours and other bar programs as often as possible. I religiously attend the annual reception held by the ACBA at the Duquesne Club for 50- and 60-year practitioners. It is important that we connect with and honor those who contributed before us. Although I believe that there are significant benefits from online relationships and virtual participation in activities, nothing connects you more than sharing laughs in the relaxed and secure cocoon of

legal community events. I urge the newer lawyers to get out there and engage with us old folks — I assure you someone will have your back. ☞

• • • • •



Pittsburgh attorney Robert A. Creo has practiced as an in-house corporate lawyer and a solo and small firm general practitioner before becoming a full-time neutral. He has mediated and arbitrated thousands of cases, including as a salary arbitrator for Major League Baseball, a grievance arbitrator for the National Football

League and a hearing officer for the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He has been on the mediator roster of the Court of Arbitration for Sports in Lausanne, Switzerland, which provides ADR services for international sports, including the Olympics. He has served as adjunct professor at Duquesne University School of Law and the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. He is the 2018 recipient of the PBA ADR Committee Sir Francis Bacon Alternative Dispute Resolution Award. He is annually included in *Best Lawyers in America* and named as a Superlawyer. He has a passion for storytelling and is a frequent presenter at *The Moth*. He is the principal of Happy! Effective Lawyer LLC (www.happy.lawyer) and author of *The Effective Lawyer* blog (happyeffectivelawyer.org/). His website is www.robertcreo.com. If you have a story to share on this subject or other practice topics, please email racreo@gmail.com.

TAKEAWAYS

- When in doubt, go.
- When in doubt, join.
- Take on some activities outside of your comfort zone.
- Carry plenty of business cards.
- Do not be intimidated by “Super Lawyers” and other mythical superheroes.

Sources and Additional Reading

Derrick Bell, *Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth* (Bloomsbury, 2002).

Randall Kiser, *How Leading Lawyers Think: Expert Insights Into Judgment and Advocacy* (Springer, 2011).

Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Shuster, 2000).