



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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### Responding to Criticism: Survival Strategies

A large law firm can be a harsh work environment. When you take a group of intelligent, ambitious, left-brained individuals, put them in charge of high-stakes work with tight deadlines, and give them highly paid but inexperienced associates, communication problems are bound to arise.

These problems are compounded by the fact that most partners receive little training in the art of personnel management. The end product is predictable: While some partners learn how to give constructive feedback, there are others who, at best, are insensitive in handing out criticism.

You may be fortunate to work with partners who give you the feedback you need to grow as a lawyer. If you work in a large firm, however, chances are reasonable that you will also encounter partners who are quick to point out your shortcomings and slow to hand out praise.

How you respond to this negative feedback is important. Your standing at the firm will be impacted a lot by your ability to act professionally when criticism is given.

In this article, I will provide some strategies for dealing with harsh criticism. While, ultimately, you may conclude that you would like to work in a more supportive environment, these strategies may help you to excel in the face of psychological adversity.

Not understanding how to respond in an appropriate manner may dramatically cut short your stay and deprive you of a great opportunity to develop your legal skills.

#### A Few Words About September 11

Before I offer these survival tips, I would like to say a quick word about our collective survival in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack. September 11 reminds us to focus on what is really important in our lives (e.g., our health, our family, our friends, our good fortune to live in the land of plenty, our interests outside of work). I know I have redoubled my own efforts to spend time with my children.

Certainly, we find fulfillment in life from having our basic needs met, through meaningful relationships, and by finding a good balance between work and our extracurricular interests.

But most of us who chose to go to law school did so because we wanted more than a job. We were ambitious enough to attend college and law school for seven years. In short, work is a very important part of our identity

and needs attention as well.

I do not mean to suggest that career satisfaction should come at the expense of family and friends; rather, it is okay to pursue career satisfaction in concert with cultivating these other important aspects of our lives.

If anything, Sept. 11 reminds us that life is too short to spend in a job that you dislike. What is really important includes being sure that we have some level of professional fulfillment (or are on our way to getting it).

### Dealing with Difficult Partners

#### 1. Don't Engage Them in Battle

The first strategy in dealing with a difficult partner is to be a good listener and stay above the fray. Probably the worst thing you could do when a partner criticizes your work is to get defensive.

Hear what the partner is saying. Ask open-ended questions that help to clarify the partner's concerns. But don't argue with the partner even if you are sure he/she is wrong.

Then take the time to process the criticism after the partner has gone. If you need to vent, do so out of the office environment with trusted friends or family.

#### 2. Don't Be Passive; Rather, Be Assertive

While you should avoid confrontation with a partner at all costs, that does not mean you should remain passive (or start getting passive-aggressive).

If you did not receive adequate background in order to do the job properly and you are criticized for the results, you need to do something about this. If you allow the partner to chastise you for something that was not your fault, then you are giving tacit approval to the partner to treat you like this in the future.

When emotions have cooled, you can ask the partner for a few minutes of his/her time. Acknowledge that the job was not done properly, and ask how you can do better the next time.

Do not blame the partner for not giving you enough of the facts. Simply indicate that you thought the assignment was "x" rather than "y" and you would like to think of ways to avoid this happening in the future (e.g., Suggest that next time you will give a quick email update to the partner to make sure you are on the right track.).

#### 3. Focus on the Substance of the Criticism Rather Than the Delivery

No one likes to be yelled at or treated with disrespect. It is degrading to have another adult treat us like a child. Most of us begin to tune out criticism when it feels like a personal attack.

But hidden behind a crazed tirade may be some important suggestions for improving your legal work. After you have had time to cool off, think about whether there is anything you can learn from the experience.

Try to separate the message from the messenger. Once you strip away the personal attack, is there anything left that merits your attention?

#### 4. Find Out What Other Associates Have Experienced

While you do not want to become the source of bad morale in your firm, it is okay to live by the credo that "misery loves company." It should comfort you to some extent to know that other associates have had similar experiences with this partner.

PAGE 2

Take their comments to heart (not so you can foment associate discord, but in order to find some solace and not take the criticism personally).

#### 5. Realize That The Partner's Tone or Behavior May Have Nothing to Do with You

Non-verbal communication and voice intonation can tell us a lot about what a person is feeling (e.g., angry, frustrated, let down). But non-verbal cues do not tell us why someone may feel a certain way.

The following story is illustrative. *A woman was sitting on a train in New York City when a man and three children got on. Shortly after they entered the train, the children became pretty loud and wild. The woman looked at the man who did nothing. Finally, she asked the man why he wasn't doing anything to control his children. The man replied in a sad voice that they had just come from the hospital, where their mother had died. (This kind of changes your perspective of the man's behavior.)*

The point of this story is that we all draw false conclusions based on someone's demeanor (e.g., The partner is yelling at me because he/she does not think I am very smart or hardworking; when in fact, the partner is under tremendous pressure to finish a deal so that he/she can leave on vacation with his family.).

While emotional outbursts should not be condoned in the workplace and are a demoralizing and destructive way to manage any employee, you will be less affected if you acknowledge that something other than your performance might be at the root of a partner's behavior.

#### Conclusion

Getting criticized in a large firm can be particularly challenging to the ego. If you made it into a large firm, then you probably take some pride in your own intellect. Having someone question your abilities in an aggressive manner can be painful.

But large firms are high-pressure work environments, and everyone is bound to receive some unwanted criticism. The secret to success in handling this criticism is to strip away the emotions and focus on the facts.

This is easier said than done, but you will be a lot happier if you continue to work at this rather than looking for positive feedback from someone who may not know how to give it.