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WHEN IS A LAWYER LIKE A BARBER?

Imagine five lawyers with similar education and skills—all in the same room. Four of them make a respectable living. One makes an outstanding living. What makes the difference? Why does one lawyer do so much better than the others?

Why is a lawyer like a person who cuts hair? My attorney coaching clients often approach me with some variation on this question. The answer is always the same. The more successful lawyer is the one who supplements his legal skills with strong people skills.

What Accounts for Success?

Research indicates that a person's cognitive intelligence (or IQ) accounts for just 20 to 40 percent of success in the workplace and in life. Emotional intelligence (EQ, also known as people skills) accounts for 60 to 80 percent of success. In an environment like law, where everyone is cognitively smart, emotional intelligence is a significant differentiator.

When my lawyer coaching clients are skeptical, I take them through the following Q&A.

Q: How many years have you been going to the same barber or hairdresser?

A: For three to 10 years.

Q: Is there anyone who could cut your hair better than this person?

A: Yes.

Q: Is there anyone who could cut your hair for less money?

A: Yes.

Q: So someone could cut your hair better and cheaper and yet you stay with the same barber or hairdresser over the years. Why is that?

A: Because I like him and I trust him.

Like and Trust

These are the same reasons clients choose you over another legal services provider—because they like you and trust you. Not because you are the most skillful. Not because you are the least expensive. But because you use your people skills to address their legal concerns with self-assurance and understanding.

Of course, you must be competent—but you don't have to be the best. In truth, very few clients are sophisticated enough to tell the competent and hard-working from the very best. And you must charge fees that are consistent with the market, but you don't have to be the cheapest. You must, however, be likeable and confident.

The next time you get a haircut, remember this exercise. Observe how the barber or hairdresser treats you. What is it about this treatment that keeps you coming back, year after year, when there are better and less expensive alternatives? What can you learn from this and incorporate into your legal practice?

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