

The Multidimensional Selfie

By Robert A. Creo



The previous column, titled “Best Practices for Representing Clients,” set forth the concept of defining a professional identity as an attorney that is consistent with your own personal beliefs, values, goals and lifestyle. This identity is not static and should evolve at various stages of what is hopefully a long career.

My observation is that lawyers usually become slotted into a practice area more by chance than by planning and action. In law school a professor may have ignited a passion for a specific area of the law. A clinic or internship, the immediate demands of the first job or the opportunity to jump into a looming case may set the path for a litigator or a transactional lawyer with a specific focus.

One colleague of mine started in the litigation department of a large national law firm intent on being a trial lawyer and 30 years later is a prominent commercial real estate practitioner. During law school I was intent on being an in-house corporate lawyer and obtained my first job in that capacity. Now I am an arbitrator, mediator and educator, which developed during the decades I spent as a general-practice storefront lawyer. Often our paths choose us as we are guided by our passions and swept along by circumstances beyond our control.

Personality Assessments

Best practices start with an awareness of self and a motivation to engage in continuous learning and enhancement of competencies.

Most people are familiar with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a written test to discern how individuals perceive the world as a basis for making decisions and taking actions. In a 1921 book Carl Jung contended that there are four basic psychological functions, with one of them being dominant in us most of the time. These are sensation, intuition, feeling and thinking.

Based on Jung’s theory, the MBTI identifies the specific preferences for how we construe our experiences and interactions. The theory expounds that there are rational functions, such as thinking and feeling, and irrational ones, such as sensation and intuition, which are also addressed in categories of subjective versus objective and deductive versus inductive. These tendencies form the basis for our interests, values, motivations, needs and goals. In the MBTI model these tendencies are classified as extraversion and introversion, sensing and intuition, thinking and feeling, judging and perceiving. As the labels imply, extraverts are action oriented and introverts prefer reflection and need quiet time to rebuild their energy. The MBTI identifies 16 separate personality types.

The Hogan Assessment was developed by Robert Hogan from his theory that the core of personality is based on evolutionary adaptations stemming from the human experience of living in groups and communities. His view is that personality must be examined from the outside, by the observer rather than the actor, and the focus is on how reputation explains and predicts behavior on the job and in relationships.

The Hogan system probes emotions and values to assess if an individual has a tendency to engage in dishonest or unethical behavior and to determine a person’s leadership potential. Many larger law firms use this tool, especially for identifying strengths and weaknesses in slotting lawyers into practice areas and for succession planning.

The DISC Personality Test arises from a theory of psychologist William Moulton Marston (who also produced the first functional lie-detector polygraph and created the Wonder Woman comic-

book character). It identifies four different personality traits: dominance, inducement, submission and compliance. The test has individuals answer questions so they can get to know themselves better and understand the behavior of self and others in interpersonal situations. I am aware of one small law firm that had the DISC test administered to all lawyers and staff, which resulted in a restructuring of work assignments and internal interactions.

These and other tests and assessments are used as appropriate tools by law firms and lawyers to gain useful insights and to guide and modify behavior. My recommendation is that every lawyer should periodically undertake at least one of these tests or assessments.

Lawyers and law firms also retain professional consultants and coaches who may use some of these or similar tools to improve performance and profitability. Some innovative law firms have programs that identify senior associates and junior partners to be included in formal efforts to improve productivity and business skills in order to groom them for future leadership roles. The best firms recognize that there is more to legal excellence than having an A-list clientele, obtaining good results and maximizing billable hours. The process of managing a law business must include a focus on identifying the best roles for each lawyer and staff person and providing relationships, support and an environment that is custom-made to each person's identity, skills, personality, motivations and goals. Lawyers should do more self-examination and probing and develop and use tools that have been commonplace in the business and industrial world for decades.

When placed in the context of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualization), alignment of professional and personal identities promotes esteem (confidence, achievement, respect) and self-actualization (morality, problem-

solving, creativity, spontaneity, lack of prejudice, acceptance of facts), which are the essential attributes of effective lawyers. In short, being content and happy with your life's work results in excellent and passionate representation arising from your being authentically engaged in solving problems in a creative and flexible manner. ☞

Takeaways

- Know thyself.
- Use psychological assessment tools, consultants and personal coaches.
- Engage in continuous learning beyond substantive law and procedure.
- Find the most suitable role and practice area for today and the foreseeable future.



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