

[Great Lessons I Learned From My First Mentor](#)

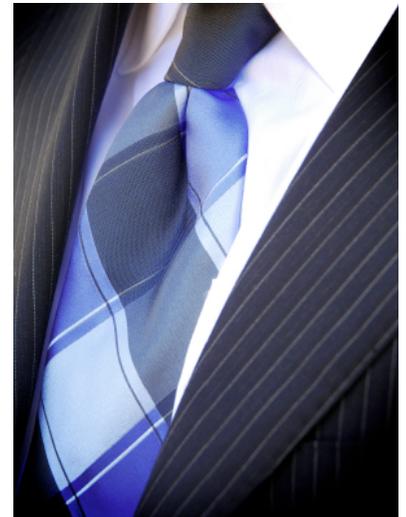
Posted by [Cordell Parvin](#) on July 11, 2011

Have you watched the [USA Network](#) TV show [Suits](#)? Among many things, the show gives you ideas about mentoring in a law firm.

When I saw the first episode, it reminded me of my first day in private practice in Roanoke, Virginia. Harvey Specter, the mentor in the show, looks, dresses (wearing three piece suits), and in some cases acts like my first mentor. In that first episode, Harvey advises new associate, Mike Ross, how to dress like a lawyer. I laughed when I saw it because that was my first lesson in private practice.

When I arrived for my first day in July, 1976 I wore the only decent suit I owned. (I had spent four years in the USAF wearing a uniform). I can't remember if I owned a long sleeve dress shirt. I think I arrived at the office wearing a short sleeve dress shirt, short socks and loafers. My mentor (we never used that term at the time) pulled me aside for my lesson in dressing like a lawyer. He advised me in fairly strong terms:

1. Lawyers never wear a short sleeve dress shirt, even if it is 100 degrees in the shade.
2. Lawyers never wear loafers with a suit (he called them bedroom slippers).
3. Lawyers make sure that their tie shoes worn with the suit are always well shined.
4. Lawyers wear over the calf socks (he explained no one wanted to see my legs when I sat down).
5. Lawyers own at least one high end tie (and do not get spots on it when eating).
6. Lawyers never leave the office without wearing their suit coat (once again even if it is 100 in the shade).
7. Lawyers only wear natural fabrics (wool and cotton).
8. Lawyers wear custom made shirts (he explained that most off the rack shirts either fit in the neck or body, but not both).



I went home that first day and shared with Nancy what a true novice I was. I didn't even know how to dress like a real lawyer, much less actually be one.

Once I was at least dressing like a real lawyer, my first mentor gave me other nuggets of wisdom. I believe he said:

1. Clients hire lawyers not law firms.
2. Clients want to hire lawyers who have "a confidence inspiring personality."
3. Law firms can hire great technicians. They graduate from law school every year. Law firms struggle to find great technicians who can also attract clients.
4. Your top priorities are your family, your work and your health. Nothing else matters. If you became the best golfer in all of Roanoke Valley, no one would really care.
5. Setting realistic goals means you will never achieve excellence.
6. You, and only you, are responsible for defining your idea of a successful career and then working to achieve it.
7. Rainmaking is not a "God given talent." You can become a rainmaker if you work hard at it and do something, no matter how small, each and every day.
8. The people who say they "tried their best" are the ones who always finish second and below in whatever they are doing.

It has been 35 years now. So, I am not 100% positive he said all eight things above. It is possible I said some of them when I mentored. Yet, I still remember our early morning conversations. I became a better lawyer and actually dressed like a lawyer, because of the time my first mentor took to both give me tips and encourage me to dream big dreams.

What did your first mentor teach you? Please share what you learned in comments.

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