

## Six Rules for a Successful Legal Career

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I owe my success in the law to three mentors and one piece of advice received early in my career.

I graduated from the University of Minnesota Law School in 1982, and immediately went to work for Stringer, Lund and Schneider in Minneapolis, MN. You will not find that law firm listed anywhere in Martindale — even if you managed to go back in time to 1982 — because those men were lead in-house counsel for The Pillsbury Company. Ed Stringer was the General Counsel, Ron Lund was the Deputy General Counsel, and Mahlon Schneider was the Assistant General Counsel. The “firm” had about 20 lawyers, 4 paralegals and a slew of administrative assistants.

Ed Stringer came out of Briggs & Morgan and ran the Pillsbury Legal Department like a law firm. Ed was so convinced that the legal department needed to function like a law firm that we even had an “in-house law firm letterhead.” Some of you will recall that in the 1980s law firms still had letterheads that attempted to list all the partners, which often resulted in the first page of a letter having all of one complete paragraph on it due to space constraints. I don’t think I’ve ever been so proud as when my name was added to that letterhead. But I digress.

Each of these men took the time to train me and mentor me in the practice of law. They were mentors before anyone thought to make that a standard buzzword in management-consulting circles. They were not concerned about whether I was going to make them a buck; they were concerned that I become a good lawyer.

Ed Stringer taught me to be rigorous in my analysis and ethical in my practice. He did not stand for sloppy work or thinking, or ethical shortcuts. Ed was razor sharp in wit, deed and thought, and you had to work to keep up. That was the point. Ed went on to be Attorney General for the Department of Education under Bush I and later served as a Justice on the Minnesota Supreme Court.

Ron Lund taught me not to be an asshole. Ron was kind enough to explain to me (three years out of law school) that when a client asked why they should do what I recommended, the correct answer should not imply: “Because I’m the lawyer and I’m smarter than you.” Ron was a gentleman in word and deed. He kept his word. Woe to you if you did not. Ron went on to be General Counsel for Medtronic.

Mahlon Schneider’s lesson might have been the most important of all: “Be generous and take pleasure in the success of others.” He taught that by how he handled himself every single day. He was generous with time, advice and his lake cabin. He went on to be General Counsel for the Hormel Company.

Another piece of good advice? As I started into the business world, my father told me: “Always hire people that are smarter than you.” This, in fact, may be the biggest reason why my career has stayed on track over the years.

To sum up the six rules:

1. Be Rigorous.
2. Be Ethical.
3. Don’t Be An Asshole.
4. Be Generous.
5. Take Pleasure In The Success Of Others.
6. Always Hire People That Are Smarter Than You.

I’ve found that success is hard work even when you do follow these rules, but it’s almost impossible when you don’t.

Thanks for reading.

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