
The Power of Perceptions

By Gerry Riskin

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Relationships with senior colleagues directly affect the career of new partners (and perhaps not-so-new). How do you gain credibility with those extremely bright but highly critical and analytical seniors who will watch your every step—noticing the negative more than the positive? This article explores how to measure up...

If you are a young lawyer working at the firm of your dreams, or something close to it, you are probably feeling some trepidation, as well as elation. How do you measure up against all of the bright lights who were hired with you? How do you gain credibility with those extremely bright but highly critical and analytical seniors who will watch your every step—noticing the negative more than the positive?

Relax. Your firm wants you to succeed as much as you do. But don't think that simply doing good work and putting in the hours will ensure your future. That attitude is a land mine that you will step on when you can least afford it.

You are dealing with a many-headed dragon—one whose heads do not communicate with one another. In a large firm, demands will be made of you from many quarters, and—while no one will have the big-picture knowledge to ensure that you are being managed well—how you are assessed will be the culmination of a number of individual perceptions about you.

As both a managing partner and consultant, I have observed how the most successful recruits interact with senior colleagues. The way you handle internal relationships will directly affect your future. Here I offer some practical advice to improve your understanding and adjustment to the environment you have chosen, and thereby enhance the perception you create.

Forgive them, for they know not what they are doing to you.

In order to tolerate the seemingly insensitive reaction of most partners, it is necessary to understand where their apparent attitude comes from. Most partners bring extraordinary cerebral prowess to their work. This manifests itself in the ability to analyze everything they see and hear in a critical way. Since this is essential for improving documents and, indeed, for overcoming the compelling arguments of adversaries, we cannot remove these capabilities without consequences to the practice.

In a perfect world, we as lawyers would apply the capacity to be critical and analytical only when and where required. Alas, in most cases we don't. It affects our social behavior, our creativity, and sometimes our relationships.

In a perfect world, you would hear what that partner liked about how you handled the matter—before telling you what you could have done better or what you did wrong. In that same perfect world, what you could have done better would be communicated just that way, without first hammering the perceived flaws to death.

This leads me to the conclusion that the first step in being appreciated is the resilience with which you react and the forgiveness you allow for the pathetically negative process with which feedback will be given to you. You can compensate by frequently asking How might you have approached that? or How do you think I might have handled that better? So instead of going home late each evening and complaining to your significant other about the insensitivity of your bosses, forgive them, for they really have no idea how extremely counterproductive their feedback pattern is.

Don't be shy.

In the frenetic law firm environment, the powerhouse who gave you the matter you are working on will, notwithstanding the intention to the contrary, not be available to give you the supplemental information you need or the guidance that might be extremely helpful. The Catch-22 is that you will be asked Why didn't you come and see me? or Why didn't you show me that material so I could have given you my views?

Responding Because your phone is always forwarded to voice-mail; you never call me back; there are always three people senior to me waiting in a line at your door; and your secretary never seems to be able to schedule me, and when she does you

defer me will not enhance your career. No, what that senior really wants, respects, admires, and appreciates is a level of assertiveness on your part that ensures that the crucial communications do occur. Whether this means tackling this person en route to the restroom or leaning against the BMW in the parking lot (careful not to scratch it) or utilizing that partner's walking time from office to elevator, *just do it*.

If you think you are imposing and possibly even irritating, I promise you that it pales in comparison to the irritation of a late or inadequate work product from you down the road. You are better off kicking the door down than presenting disappointing work.

Speak up.

If you have an idea, express it! For a while, we're all intimidated by some of the powerhouses in the practice. This period can range from until we get to know the person to the lifetime of the intimidator. But remember, you graduated with distinction from a great school. They begged you to come to work at this fabulous firm, and when they hired you they complimented you on your diverse capabilities. So now, how come your genius and experience don't come to mind in the form of asking for your views? Worse, what's the point of doing this the hard way or the inferior way, only to end up being criticized for the quality or cost of the result?

There is only one alternative: Have the courage to offer your views. Whether you learned something on a related matter or have a thought on a more efficient process, express it. At the very least, ask permission to express it: I have a thought that you may find helpful. I am not sure, but would you like to hear it? Who is going to answer no to that question?

What if your idea is shot down? Most of your ideas will be, but when the power people are sitting around being critical and analytical about everyone, you will have earned comments like takes initiative. That may separate you from those who are not going anywhere. Courage is respected in the law firm environment, even if it isn't obvious from the immediate reaction.

Admit when you don't know.

After trying to find out, of course. If you don't know, you had better be able to demonstrate that it wasn't for lack of trying. This requires some clairvoyance in that you have to be able to anticipate the kinds of questions that might be forthcoming. Saying I don't know is much more palatable when accompanied by a thorough review of the relevant cases was surprisingly unhelpful, as were my informal discussions with two of the senior people in our firm who specialize in the area. The worst sin, the gravest error, is attempting to bluff: allowing the embarrassment of not knowing what you think you ought to know, that you will look like an idiot for not knowing, to motivate you to "guess" or state a view that has no legs at all. When the cross-examination comes, you will have no option except to assume the embryonic position and roll out the door. That is an experience to be avoided, as it seems to correlate to a mediocre future.

Have it ready before it was expected.

OK, I know that every request made of you is unreasonable and fails to give you even a remote chance of meeting the deadline. There are two ways around it. The one I would recommend is that you learn to negotiate more reasonable deadlines in the first place. This may require politely saying No, I cannot complete the task by Thursday at noon and keep the other promises I have made to other senior partners, but I can deliver by 4:00 Friday afternoon. Would that work for you? Now, unless you are preparing in support of a court appearance or a board meeting, the answer nine times out of 10 is in the affirmative.

The second way is to suffer sooner than you were planning to. If it is impossible by Thursday noon, then it's only a little more impossible to finish the assignment by Thursday at 9 a.m. The point is that your timing will be measured against what was expected, not what was reasonable—and sooner than expected is infinitely more acceptable than later than expected.

A caution: Don't deliver it too far ahead of when it was expected or it will diminish the perceived value of what was created. (If the report is due in a week and you deliver it in a day, there will be a perception that you rushed it or approached it superficially—even if you spent twice as many hours on it as expected.)

Learn to say no.

Everybody loves yes until they figure out that it was a lie—then they get very, very angry. In the pressure to please when the request is being made of us, there is almost a compulsion to say yes. In fact, everything about us points to a yes. Culturally, saying no is an affront, possibly rude, maybe disrespectful.

So how can you say no and preserve the dignity of the situation? Alex McKenzie, a Harvard professor, taught five steps to saying no that I recommend for your consideration:

1. Listen carefully (make sure that you understood the request)
2. Say no (before making excuses)
3. Explain why (other commitments?)
4. Offer alternatives (Can X help you? or Can I do it on the weekend?)
5. Offer guidance for the future (If you have one of these coming up again, let me know and I will clear the deck.)

This is not the only way to say no, but perhaps the way to do it if you don't have a better way.

Listen with a pen.

This may seem trivial, but it isn't. Taking quality notes when receiving internal instructions is vital to getting the data right. It also tells the delegator that you are indeed concentrating. The corollary is also true: There is no better way to aggravate one of your firm leaders than to leave them suspicious as to whether you are paying attention. Too basic? Not if you want to be valued internally.

If you are enjoying your firm, say so.

Don't assume that your sentiments are self-evident. It takes only a few seconds to tell a senior colleague that you are grateful for the time he or she has taken to give thorough instructions or to help. Even though, as explained above, the people you are dealing with don't think to say thank you often enough, it does not change their appetite or appreciation for hearing it.

Never pass on or discuss a rumor or a negative comment.

Change the subject. You are living in a petri dish of negativity, where people see what's wrong with every picture. Even though you will be tempted to participate in the analyses, I recommend that you refrain. It won't be easy because the easy thing to do is to pile on. The best tactic is to simply change the subject; usually, people will not even notice. What they will notice, over time, is that you seem to be positive, upbeat, that you are not a whiner or complainer. Having this reputation is a significant career-enhancer!

Can do.

What do you like? How could it be better? An extension of the never malign doctrine is the companion attitude that If there is a way to do it, I'll find it. It is amazing how many of us in the pressures of day-to-day practice react to requests by reciting our concerns. Expressing our optimism, or at least our willingness to expend our best efforts, goes a long way to creating the perception that we are reliable and, indeed, even preferred as a source of capable assistance.

As a realist, I know there are exceptions to almost every rule and that a great deal of good personal judgment goes in the mix. But these suggestions should be useful to attorneys in a large-firm environment where you must make a good impression on many senior colleagues.

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