

from the president

By James J. Sandman



What Makes Some Lawyers Role Models?

The D.C. Bar's Law Practice Management Section recently presented its annual "Legends of the D.C. Bar" program, this year featuring William Coleman and Marna Tucker discussing their remarkable careers.

Bill Coleman clerked for Justice Frankfurter, was a member of the team that won *Brown v. Board of Education*, and served as secretary of transportation under President Ford. He has counseled major American corporations for decades.

Marna Tucker, one of the nation's leading domestic relations lawyers, was the first woman president of the District of Columbia Bar. She has served in multiple leadership roles in the American Bar Association, and has been at the forefront of efforts to expand the role of women in the legal profession.

Although their careers have taken different paths, Bill and Marna have a number of characteristics in common. Both are superb practitioners, sought out by clients for their judgment and wisdom as well as for their technical skills. Both have engaged broadly in the legal profession and in the important issues of their times. And both are exceptionally generous with their time and their talents, counseling scores of other lawyers eager to learn from them.

They are not just successful lawyers. They are role models—examples of all that a lawyer should be.

What makes some lawyers role models?

Listening to Bill and Marna made me think of all the other lawyers who have been my role models. My role models in the profession are a diverse group of people, from varied backgrounds and with different careers. If I could gather them all in a room, they might not think initially that they have much in common. But they do. And I suspect that if you asked any group of lawyers to describe their role models, you would hear them list many of the same characteristics repeatedly. The common starting point

would likely be that lawyers who are role models are outstanding practitioners, experts in their fields who achieve successful results for their clients. Then, in one form or another, I believe that many or most of the following shared traits of role models would emerge:

1. *They have a keen understanding of law as a service profession.* In dealing with clients, they are responsive, proactive, and empathetic. They anticipate clients' needs. They leave every client with the sense that he or she is the most important client the lawyer has. They do not shrink from the less glamorous aspects of practice. As I once heard former D.C. Bar president Dan Reznick say, "The best lawyers I know have the shortest lists of the tasks they consider beneath them."

2. *They have integrity.* The most admired lawyers are straightforward, trustworthy, and reliable. It's not just that they comply with the Rules of Professional Conduct. They always take the high road, never shade the truth, and don't make excuses. They admit and take responsibility for mistakes, share credit, and don't play games.

3. *They are professional and respectful in all of their dealings, not only with clients and judges, but with adversaries, other lawyers, staff, and strangers.* They treat others well. Few people would cite as a role model a lawyer who is rude, abusive, patronizing, or oblivious to the feelings of those around him or her.

4. *They give back to their communities.* Lawyers who are role models do pro bono work regularly and throughout their careers. They engage in public and community service. They serve on boards. They share their talents of analysis, reasoning, expression, and persuasion for the public good. They are volunteers.

5. *They mentor other lawyers.* Role models regard the training and development of less experienced lawyers as a personal and professional obligation. They take an interest in the people who work with them. They spend time explaining

assignments thoroughly, giving detailed and constructive feedback, identifying and nurturing colleagues' strengths, and helping colleagues address weaknesses.

6. *They value differences among people.* They have the self-confidence to be able to recognize that their way is not the only way or always the best way. They know that the highest quality work comes from the pooled talents of people with different perspectives. They realize that there are many skills that go into making a great lawyer, and that no one has them all in equal measure. Because they value differences, they are able to bring out the best in others.

7. *They never forget that family comes first.* Lawyers who are role models have balance in their lives. People are unlikely to point to a work-obsessed, ambition-driven lawyer whose family is an afterthought as someone they want to emulate. The lawyers who others want to be like know what is important in life.

8. *They enjoy what they do.* Not surprisingly, lawyers who exhibit the first seven traits are happy, and it shows. They are positive, energetic, and enthusiastic about their professional and personal lives.

This list is not exhaustive. You can undoubtedly add to my list characteristics that your role models share. Whatever points you might add, I would hazard a guess that your points, like mine, are generally not taught in law schools, but are nevertheless critical components of the success and happiness of the most admired lawyers.

Discussing values like these is an important part of the training and development of growing new role models—the theme of my year as Bar president. I invite you to tell me about your role models, and share your thoughts about how we can develop more lawyers like them. Please name names, so that we can celebrate them and thank them for what they contribute to our profession. You can reach me at james.sandman@aporter.com.