Lawyers Owe One Another

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Male Culture Still Dominates The Profession

APPROXIMATELY one-third of the students now in law school are women. This is up from less than 5 percent when I went to law school more than 30 years ago, and less than 10 percent only two decades ago. In some law schools, women make up a majority of the student body.

For the long term, it seems likely that at least a quarter of the legal profession will be women. Women, while in law school and then upon entering the profession, face many problems that are different in degree if not kind from those faced by men.

Of course, most law students, without regard to gender, proverbially are scared to death in the first year, worked to death in the second year, and bored to death in the third year. Most law students, without regard to gender, have little idea what law-practice is actually like, and enter practice vocationally unready.

Without regard to gender, many law students fear making a premature career commitment ("I want to keep my options open"), while many others are anxious whether they can get any kind of decent law job. Regardless of gender, if they are like most of us, law students have a fear of failure that they will never quite lose.

Special Problems

Nevertheless, women...
THE TITLE OF LAWYER carries with it some significant lifelong obligations: obligations to clients; to the courts; to brothers and sisters at the bar; to employers, public and private; to opposing counsel and parties; and to the general citizenry. Of all these professional responsibilities, it seems to me that the duties lawyers owe to one another — honesty, fair dealing, cooperation and civility — have been the most neglected in recent years. It is my purpose here to examine these duties and to share some of my concerns about the increasing number of lawyers who fail to recognize their obligations.

The ethics of the profession command members of the bar to act honestly in their relations with each other. Both the Lawyer’s Code of Professional Responsibility and the Model Rules of Professional Conduct include provisions prohibiting false statements of law or fact in the course of representing a client. Honesty requires that evidence not be concealed, altered or destroyed, and that witnesses not be secreted or made unavailable. Indeed, it is professional misconduct for a lawyer to engage in any type of conduct that involves dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation.

Despite these ethical constraints, instances of lawyer-to-lawyer dishonesty seem to be on the rise. All too frequent now are the reports about those who deceive their colleagues by withholding documents that ought to be produced; by lying about the whereabouts of witnesses; by falsely promising to maintain the status quo pending resolution of a dispute; by holding out the possibility of settlement when there is none; by misrepresenting the extent of the authority conferred by a client; and by providing misleading information or omitting important details in regard to a client’s assets or insurance coverage.

CLOSELY RELATED TO the duty of honesty is the duty of fair dealing. Both the lawyer’s code and the model rules enjoin lawyers from communicating ex parte with a court or judge in an adversary proceeding, except in very limited circumstances, and from communicating with a party represented by another lawyer, except by consent or as authorized by law. Fairness also requires that lawyers keep their word in their dealings with one another.

More than 70 years ago, a British barrister wrote: There is no more heinous offence at the Bar than a breach of the confidence which counsel are entitled to place in each other. The nature of their business is such that more than in any other profession the members of the Bar must be able to rely implicitly upon each other’s sense of honour. It is a trust which is seldom if ever betrayed.

The American College of Trial Lawyers has adopted a Code of Trial Conduct that instructs lawyers not only to adhere strictly to all express agreements with opposing counsel, but also to adhere to those agree-

Continued on page 24

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The Duties That Lawyers Owe to One Another

by ROGER J. MILLER

Continued from page 13

ments "implied by the circumstances or by local custom." The trial conduct code goes so far as to prohibit a lawyer from causing the entry of a default or dismissal without first inquiring whether opposing counsel intends to proceed. Fair dealing at the bar mandates reasonable efforts to expedite litigation as well as reasonableness in making and complying with discovery demands.

Almost every judge and lawyer has a story to tell about a lawyer who somehow was unfair in his or her dealings with a colleague. In two recent decisions, my court was constrained to condemn contacts by prosecutors, acting through government agents, with individuals represented by counsel.

The Federal Rules of Appellate Procedure allow attorneys to bring to our attention pertinent authorities that come to their attention after the brief is filed and after oral argument but before decision. Rather than merely giving the supplemental citations and the reasons for them, some lawyers take advantage of the occasion by presenting further argument. I consider this to be an improper ex parte communication, and therefore a breach of the duty to deal fairly.

The erroneous notion that responsibility to clients supersedes all other professional responsibilities seems to be gaining popularity among the members of the bar. This notion has led an increasing number of lawyers to ignore agreements that they have made with opposing counsel in order to advance the perceived interests of their clients. It also has led to a general decline in fair dealing between counsel during the course of litigation as well as in the performance of the other duties lawyers owe to one another.

ALTHOUGH THE OBLIGATION of lawyers to cooperate with one another long has been considered a significant professional obligation, it, too, has been made more honored in the breach. That certain matters arising during the course of legal representation are confined to the sole discretion of the lawyer is well established in the ethics of the profession. Those matters include extensions of time, continuances, adjournments, waivers of various procedural formalities, admission of facts and other technical aspects of litigation not involving the one of the student members of the organization conduct a small survey of lawyers to determine what courtesies they regularly extended to other attorneys without their client's consent. The results were astounding to an old-time lawyer like myself. Even as to such matters as adjournments, many lawyers said they would first seek the consent of their clients. If the client objects, their answer would be "no." What these lawyers fail to perceive, however, is that noncooperation is counterproductive and ultimately dis serves the client as well as the legal system.

IT SHOULD GO WITHOUT saying that lawyers should treat each other with decency and respect. The vigorous representation of clients is not inconsistent with civility. Yet there is a civility crisis of major proportions involving the bar. Our ethical standards make it crystal clear that ill feelings between clients should not influence relations between lawyers, that a lawyer should not refer to opposing counsel in a derogatory way and that haranguing tactics interfere with the orderly administration of justice.

Civility demands that lawyers abstain from alIuding to peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of opposing counsel and from using litigation papers as vehicles for charging an adversary with improprieties not relevant to the litigation. Uncivil conduct in lawyer-to-lawyer relations demonstrates a lack of respect for the legal system and for those who serve it. It tends to diminish public confidence in the system and in the legal profession, and is prejudicial to the administration of justice. It should be condemned strongly as a most serious violation of the ethical standards of the profession.

The official reports are rife with examples of uncivil conduct. In a reported decision in which I was constrained to deal with the issue of prosecutorial misconduct, among others, I noted that "the prosecutor addressed defense counsel at one point as 'you sleazebag," at another as 'you hypocritical son-,... as being "so unlearned in the law,.. . and on several occasions the prosecutor objected to questions by the defense as 'nonsense.' " A reported decision of the District of Columbia Court of Appeals describes a landlord-tenant dispute in which one lawyer made ad hominem attacks on the ethnicity and educational

nal, "Playing Hardball," and "Rambo Litigation," have focused attention on the issue of attorney-to-attorney relations. The Committee on Federal Courts of the New York City Bar Association has published "A Proposed Code of Litigation Conduct," with the stated purpose of "addressing the way lawyers treat each other." One of the drafters of the report is quoted as saying: "We tried to draw the line between legitimate hardball and what some people on the committee called spitball."

Finding that valuable judicial and attorney time is consumed in resolving unnecessary contention and sharp practices between lawyers, the judges of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas recently adopted standards of conduct for attorneys practicing before their court. The Cleveland Bar Association has adopted "A Lawyer's Creed of Professionalism" to deal with "uncivil, counterproductive and unprofessional conduct."

My own opinion is that all these new codes and standards are unnecessary. The relations of lawyers with each other are governed by traditional principles of professional responsibility. These principles are embodied in the Lawyer's Code of Professional Responsibility and in the Model Rules of Professional Conduct, explicitly and implicitly, and have governed conduct at the bar from time immemorial.

They require simply that lawyers be honest, civil, cooperative and fair in their dealings with one another in order to better serve clients, the legal system and society at large. By performing their duties to each other, lawyers honor the ancient and learned profession of which they are privileged to be a part.


(3) Code, supra note 1, DR 109-A; model rules, supra note 1, Rule 3.4(b).

(4) Code, supra note 1, DR 109-A; model rules, supra note 1, Rule 8.4(c).

(5) Dunbar, "False Claims Can Be Made With Omission" (NLJ, Feb. 3).

(6) As to ex parte communications with the court, see DR 7-101(D).
time, continuances, adjournments, waivers of various procedure-securities, admission of facts and other technical aspects of litigation not involving the merits." To abuse that discretion is, in my opinion, a serious breach of the duty to cooperate.

The lawyer's code teaches that "[i]n certain areas of legal representation not affecting the merits of the case or substantially prejudicing the rights of a client, a lawyer is entitled to make decisions on his own." It also teaches that "[a] lawyer should not prejudice the client's interests, whether such prejudice is caused by his own actions or inactions or by those of the client."

The model rules advise that a lawyer, not being bound to press for every advantage on his client's behalf, is invested with "professional discretion in determining the means by which a matter should be pursued."

The purpose of imposing an ethical duty of cooperation is not to promote the collegiality of the bar, however desirable that may be, but to advance the cause of justice through a legal system that functions efficiently and expeditiously. Indeed, all the duties owed by lawyers to each other — honesty, fair dealing and civility, as well as cooperation — are imposed for the same purpose. The authors of a new book on building relationships as a means of dealing with differences have found that "the better the working relationship, the better the client is served."

Of course, the cooperation of counsel serves the interests of clients in the context of negotiation and dealing as well as in the context of litigation. It is by now well established that in any representation of a client, there is a zone of discretion within which the lawyer is permitted to act in the client's interest. For instance, a lawyer may refuse to exert his influence on the client to do what the lawyer believes is in the client's best interest. This is known as "professional judgment to waive or fail to assert a client's right or position."

Very recently, my brother told me that one of his clients raised a terrible fuss about an extension of time granted to an adversary. The lawyer said the man was upset with his enemy and that he did not wish to cooperate with that enemy in any way whatsoever. My brother was prepared to withdraw from further representation if the client refused to accept his authority as to matters ethically within his discretion. Indeed, the Code of Professional Responsibility requires a lawyer to refuse continued employment if the exercise of his or her independent professional judgment is likely to be affected.

Last year, I was privileged to serve as President of the Albany Law School American Inn of Court. The Albany Inn is modeled after the English Inns of Court and is designed to encourage law students and young lawyers in the skills of advocacy and the standards of ethical behavior. As an experiment, I had

The Good News, Of course, is that lawyers are beginning to talk about drawing a line between zealous advocacy and unacceptable conduct. Two articles in the American Bar Association Journal...