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# Gratitude, Kindness: *Super Strengths In Law Practice*

*By Pat Snyder*

I care passionately about my clients, but you know, I'm not doing brain surgery here. No one is going to die. So, you need some perspective, and when I'm feeling really down, and depressed, and just feel like I don't wanna do this any more, I go do something. It sounds corny, but I go do something nice for somebody. I perform a random act of kindness; it makes me feel better.

*– Woman named to the Super Lawyers list*

We all know that analytical strengths are critical to the practice of law. Persistence, hard work, integrity and courage are paramount as well. But what about softer strengths, like gratitude and kindness?

A study I recently completed in partial fulfillment of a Master of Applied Positive Psychology degree at the University of Pennsylvania suggests that the regular use of "heart" (emotion-based) strengths, coupled with the more

expected "head" (analytical) strengths can take a law practice to the next level. Especially in the areas of business development, firm management, and work-life balance, relationship-enriching heart strengths – gratitude, kindness, social intelligence, enthusiasm, forgiveness, hope, love, appreciation of beauty and excellence, citizenship, humor, curiosity, spirituality – can play a pivotal role.

For the study, I contacted 140 women attorneys across the country who had been listed in the Super Lawyers or Rising Star directories, and invited them to take the Brief Strengths Test on Penn's website [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org) so we could identify their top, most energizing character strengths among the 24 naturally occurring strengths identified by positive psychologists.

Because researchers have found a correlation between wellbeing and the regular use of our top strengths, I also requested they participate in an optional interview about whether they used their strengths regularly in the practice of law and if so, how.

Regular use of both heart and head strengths has been linked to increased resilience, so I was especially curious about strengths strategies these women were using to cope with today's faster-paced, more competitive legal profession and its effects on work-life balance.

I predicted that consistent with positive psychology research on wellbeing, I would find that these successful practitioners were finding ways to use their natural strengths in their practices on a regular basis. I also predicted that head strengths would be the most prevalent. Both men and women lawyers, tested with the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) in the early '90s, showed up as Thinkers rather than Feelers.

What I did not predict was that the predominant character strengths of these super-achievers would be gratitude and kindness.

Granted, the 17 willing to participate may have been a kinder and more grateful lot than those who did not. But even so, what was striking was their ability to offer specific ways they use their heart strengths to navigate the critical areas of business development and client retention, firm management,

and work-life integration. In each of these areas, they were using their heart strengths to build relationships.

One participant, a partner, reflected on how her multiple heart strengths of love, gratitude and social intelligence play into business development:

“I think that just being able to ... try to figure out what makes somebody tick is always a good quality. Essentially, what we’re describing here is almost sales. Those qualities are helpful. They’re not sufficient. But if a client has to choose between somebody who they have a connection with who also has the credentials and somebody they didn’t connect with and has the credentials, I have to believe they’re gonna choose the one that they connected with.”

Another commented that the way she gets business is through “friendships and connections and relationships with people who have the ability to send me business.”

And still another talked about how the mutual expression of gratitude with clients, i.e., her expression of gratitude for the business and their expression of gratitude for her good work, had fueled long-standing relationships.

In the area of firm management, a founding partner noted that her strength of kindness made it natural to notice personal issues her employees were going through and express empathy. Her strength of gratitude inspired her to thank employees for their hard work and reward them for it financially.

Another partner used her heart strength of forgiveness to forgive both herself and the employees she mentors. As she put it:

“... people make mistakes, and I try to not, you know, clobber them over and over again with one mistake, and try to help them learn. And I try to put my mistakes in perspective as well, and not – you know, there was a time in my life where I really would kind of go over and over and over in my head a mistake that I made, and I just realized it wasn’t very productive. So I just try to come to the lessons and move on.”

Despite the usefulness of heart strengths in their role as lawyers, participants were keenly aware that if carried too far, kindness could be seen as weakness and they could be taken advantage of both within a law office and with opposing counsel. Those who used their softer strengths effectively displayed what Wharton professor Adam Grant has described as “otherish” giving in his new book Give

and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success. They gave, but also looked out for their own interests and were strategic in their relationships with less generous “takers.”

Finally, it is not surprising that study participants reported work-life balance as their biggest challenge. Fifteen of the 16 who agreed to an interview were raising or had raised at least one child while actively practicing, and 12 described themselves as litigators.

Gratitude, kindness and social intelligence showed up as heart strengths that were pivotal to making flexible childcare arrangements with back-up plans and creating networks of friends and family to help. Here again, a balance of heart and head strengths came up. Analytical strengths like self-regulation and persistence played well in managing complicated family schedules, but participants warned against bringing cross-examination skills home, especially with a stay-at-home dad.

The study suggests that there are good business reasons for lawyers with strong heart strengths to cultivate them personally. It also makes good business sense for the legal environments where they work to pay attention to these strengths and create a culture friendly to their use.

Lawyers with heart may find it easier than their more strongly analytical

counterparts to become rainmakers and firm managers and to lead the way for others to develop business and manage.

And certainly, in a profession where depression rates have been disproportionately high, it makes a lot of sense to encourage an activity that can boost emotional well-being.

Pat Snyder, J.D., MAPP, is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach. A complete copy of her study is available at <http://tinyurl.com/awch7yo>.



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