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The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Clients



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I have already tackled the qualities of a good lawyer: counselor; advocate; and prudent warrior. In this column and the three that follow, I will tackle the qualities of what makes a good client.

You Too Can Be a Client

What is a client? Here's what Black's Law Dictionary says:

client n. (14c) [...] one in whose interest a lawyer acts, as by giving advice, appearing in court, or handling a matter.

In short, anyone who employs a lawyer is a client. That goes for lawyers too. Have any of you not heard the saying that “a lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client”? It's usually true.

Judge Not, Lest You Be Judged

A client (hopefully) is only involved in one lawsuit in their entire lifetime. But as a lawyer, I'm a repeat player in the legal system. I have two principles in mind when approaching the qualities of a good client. The first principle comes from the opening of *Anna Karenina*: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” In other words, happy families share a common set of attributes that make them happy; and unhappy families share a varied set of attributes that make them unhappy. The second is Stephen Covey's principle: a person's character determines their personal and interpersonal effectiveness.

Good Clients Have Better Outcomes

Here are my seven habits of highly effective clients:

- 1. Telling the Truth:** Effective clients tell their lawyers the truth from the start. They understand that equivocations, lies, and half-truths will eventually come out.
- 2. Living in Reality:** Effective clients try to be objective about their own case so they can adapt to the challenges of the legal system and the disappointments they will face.
- 3. Being Realistic About Outcomes:** The legal system is designed to render “rough justice.” Understanding that the legal process can be unpredictable is crucial. Effective clients are willing to adjust their expectations and are prepared for many outcomes.
- 4. Thinking and Talking About Cost:** Effective clients talk with their lawyer about the costs and benefits of the litigation. They keep talking about the costs and benefits of litigation as the case progresses and will create and commit to exit strategies if the case gets too expensive, traumatic, or uncertain.

- 5. Respecting Deadlines:** Because a missed deadline can have severe consequences for your case, effective clients respond promptly to requests from their lawyers, and ensure they meet all deadlines.
- 6. Asking and Answering Questions:** Effective clients answer their attorney's questions as diligently, accurately, thoroughly, and honestly as possible. They understand that lawsuits are a “race to the facts,” and they help their lawyer get to—and sift through—the key facts for the best possible outcome.
- 7. Listening to Answers:** Effective clients listen to their lawyer's answers to their questions. They not only ask follow-up questions to clarify, they constantly try to reframe and translate legal terms, practices, strategies into language and concepts that they understand from their professional and personal experience.

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