

Traits of a good lawyer

Andrew Steel, a partner at Martelli McKegg, says that:

A “good lawyer understands their role in the profession and adheres to it”. He says a lawyer must “uphold the rule of law and facilitate the administration of Justice. A good lawyer should have courage and passion to pursue their client’s interest in a professional, diligent and lawful way. A lawyer must always be respectful and courteous to opposing lawyers, self-represented persons, of course the Court and its staff.”

Raewyn Lovett ONZM, a partner at Duncan Cotterill, says:

A good lawyer has “a sense of responsibility, the ability to see another’s perspective, good analytical skills, be good communicator, have the strength to withstand pressure, to act ethically and to build relationships of trust and confidence”.

Jim Farmer QC says:

“The hallmarks of a good lawyer are honesty and integrity, good judgement in assessing strengths and weakness of a case, diligence and hard work, having good relationship with other practitioners, living a balanced life and having a social conscience”.

Justice Venning, the Chief High Court Judge says:

“In my view the most fundamental point is that lawyers should enter the profession for the right reasons, because they want to be part of a satisfying and challenging profession which involves serving the public and the rule of law. In addition to the values which underpin the profession, honesty and integrity, an ability to be able to communicate and relate to people from all walks of life is important.”

He adds: “It is also important that, as the profession is built on relationships, (between bench and counsel and between counsel and solicitors) they understand the practice of the law is a long-term commitment. It takes time to build the trust and respect which those relationships depend on.”

David Bigio QC says:

“It is easy to stereotype a good litigator as being someone who is necessarily aggressive. Being assertive does come into play from time to time. However, one particular quality which may be underrated is

empathy. This applies not just to one’s own clients but also to the opposing party. Sometimes the most effective cross-examination comes from focusing on the other party’s world view and why they are insisting that they are right. It goes without saying, therefore, that a related and vital trait is to be willing and a good listener.”

Jane Anderson QC says:

“In my view qualities of an effective lawyer are incisiveness, intelligence, integrity, an ability to see the issues from all sides while advancing your client’s position, and above all exercising good judgement”.

Justice Cooper offers this view:

“First and foremost, the ability to empathise. Good lawyers are able to put themselves in the shoes of others. The law is all about how people interrelate. Once this is understood much else falls into place, including substantive law. A good lawyer will try to understand her client’s reactions and needs. A good lawyer will be sensitive to the costs of the legal transactions in which she is engaged. A good cross-examiner will have been able to imagine herself in the witness’s position. A good advocate will understand why some submissions will fare better with a particular judge than others, why lengthy submissions ought to have an index, why brevity is often an important path to persuasion. These are all examples of empathy.

“The ability to sift the important from the unimportant, and to focus on the former.

“A sense of justice and fairness. Honesty.”

The Attorney-General, Christopher Finlayson QC, offers this perspective on what makes a good lawyer. He says:

“A willingness to learn. Law graduates must

accept law school is only the beginning, not the end, of a legal education. They must continue to educate themselves throughout their legal careers.

“Good knowledge of the law. In my experience, the lawyers who most often get in trouble are the ones who lack adequate legal knowledge, or fail to seek assistance when they should.

“Excellent judgement and analytical skills. Lawyers need to be able to understand and evaluate complex information and make reasoned decisions based on that information.

“Recognition that being a member of the profession is a privilege. The best lawyers don’t see the profession as a business or embark on a legal career to make money.

“Humility. This characteristic goes further than any other in my opinion. No one is entitled to career progression or success. It must be earned.

“A life outside the law. It is very important to look after yourself and have interests outside your job.”

So these comments offer a diverse view of the necessary skills and traits of a good lawyer but the theme that runs through them all are that the core skills of honesty, integrity, communication, intelligence, judgement, hard work and respect for others are vital.

None of these skills are gender specific. So let us rise to the challenge to lead and inspire the newcomers to our profession by modelling these skills in all our dealings with others. If we can all do this then I remain very hopeful for the future of this great profession.

Kate Davenport is a Queen’s Counsel at Bankside Chambers in Auckland. She is a civil and commercial litigator.



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