

The personality wellness connection

"The only effort worth making is the one it takes to learn the geography of one's own nature." Paul Frederick Bowles

It is understood that every profession and vocation has specific and unique characteristics. Just as individuals have personalities, so do groups of individuals who are engaged in certain experiences. A set of mental, emotional and behavioural traits are common to the legal profession. Some of these may be stereotypical, but they offer a framework for comparison. If you are a lawyer, or the family member of a lawyer, there is value in looking at these traits to see which ones fit and how they affect both your practice and personal life. It is also worth examining how the practice of law has affected or changed your views of yourself.

The general view is that lawyers know how to get things done. They have superb analytical and negotiating skills and are problem solvers. Steven Keeva points out that no other profession comes close to the law in preparing people to take on a wide variety of challenges – law practice, business, politics, journalism. Lawyers are viewed as successful, knowledgeable, and leaders in the community.

Legal training develops a set of skills and also an attitude. A shift begins to take place in law school. This is sometimes subtle but powerful and includes a view of the world and how to manage it. Law students are expected to learn to "think like a lawyer." Susan Daicoff of the Florida Coastal School of Law examined the impact of law school and the change that takes place during the law school experience. She notes that the pre-law student has normal levels of psychological distress, but once in practice, the

individual's distress level is higher than normal accompanied by a pessimistic outlook on life. The result was a preference for "thinking" over "feeling."

David Hall also discusses this change in his book *The Spiritual Revitalization of the Legal Profession*. Specific traits are directly and subtly offered as the acceptable way to conduct oneself within the legal profession.

Personality traits

Often lawyers are referred to or describe themselves as Type A personalities. What is a Type A personality?

The two features of a Type A personality are: 1) time urgency (impatience); and 2) free-floating apprehension or hostility. Characteristics of people with Type A personalities include impatience, insecurity about one's status, competitive, aggressive and incapable of relaxation. The person with a Type A personality is also often successful in a material sense and highly regarded by peers and clients. These are characteristics that many lawyers and people who work with lawyers can recognize.

In his article, *"Do I think and Act Like a Lawyer?"* John Starzynski identifies lawyer values and attitudes and the impact on behaviour.

Perfectionism. Fear of making a mistake means that things have to be done perfectly and no one else can do it just right. The stress of perfectionism adds to lawyer stress.

Need for control. Often there is the need to control others in order to feel control of everything – process and out-

come and all of the little details. This includes clients, staff, colleagues, and family members. This leads to stress and conflict because everyone has a different pace and different priorities. Also, recognizing what we don't need to control frees up time for the essentials.

Delayed gratification. Priorities tend to get shifted in order to meet the other patterns of perfectionism and control. Things other than work-related matters, files, deadlines, client demands mean that any time for self (relationships, social events, family functions) are postponed to a future time when there is less pressure. This time, of course, doesn't come.

Need for external recognition. It is not good enough to be right – there must be evidence and acknowledgement that you are right. Thus, the "win" in a case is external proof of being right. It is a constant state of defense.

Self doubt. Many lawyers feel like imposters. Lawyers often feel that they must appear confident and have the answers to complex questions. There is little room for error and some day someone might realize that they don't know the answers and are a fraud.

These characteristics make it difficult for lawyers to seek assistance. Lawyers are in a position of leadership and help people solve problems. It is therefore difficult to acknowledge the need for assistance. Professionals who work with lawyers are more effective if they understand the pressures and characteristics of members of the legal profession. One thing that we notice at the Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program is that the reluctance to deal with and inclination to deny a problem means that lawyers often wait until

things have become a crisis (bankruptcy, legal issues such as criminal charges) before asking for help. Sometimes they are in a position with little choice because help is suggested, mandated or court ordered. Lawyers often seek help because the problem is no longer a secret, is affecting others and own their professional conduct (such as disciplinary action or addictive behaviour).

Characteristics & impact

Therapists and counsellors who work with lawyers must understand these common traits and look at the factors that influence lawyers. This applies to the recognition by the lawyers themselves and any professional or treatment regime that works with lawyers. These characteristics were documented by the Talbott Recovery Centre where there is a specific program for lawyers and other professionals.

It is important to understand the lawyer characteristics when a lawyer seeks assistance. Understanding on the part of the lawyer and the therapist makes for more effective communication and increases the possibility of positive change.

1. **Superior intellectual/verbal skills.** This means that lawyers can talk themselves and others out of the need for help. It also allows avoidance of unwanted feedback.
2. **Ability to see differences between person and circumstances.** This is part of what the lawyer does at work (it is a rape case not a person). Lawyers see themselves as different from others who may be in similar difficult circumstances due to the nature of their work and unique experiences.

3. **Difficulty acknowledging even minor personal shortcomings.** This fits with the aura and perfectionism that often is part of the lawyer personality. It is difficult to deal with emotions – especially one's own. It is easy to minimize consequences of behaviour. (Seeking help only when the consequences are unavoidable is part of this characteristic.)
4. **Preference for concise, logical reasoning.** This serves as a defense and lawyers can develop quickly the “right answers” from a text book perspective, but avoid personal involvement in any change process.
5. **Professional demeanor.** Lawyers often challenge staff and demand similar educational level of therapists or staff. This also serves to keep a distance between staff and the lawyer and slows the process of working toward change or solution.
6. **Need for validation from equals.** Lawyers need to know that other lawyers have experienced a similar situation and have made appropriate changes. Who but another lawyer could understand? This is why our peer volunteer program is so important.

Conclusion

Lawyers have high standards of behaviour and image to maintain. They are also human beings with emotions and important personal relationships. Finding a balance between logic and emotion is the challenge. Professor Hall states, “If we continue as a profession to give reverence to the traits of the attorney personality and minimize the importance of emotional

and spiritual values ...there will remain a void between what lawyers think and do and who they really are.”

Balance is a critical element in the healthy personal and professional life. There is a “lawyer personality.” When the personality traits are viewed in combination with the values of the individual, increased understanding and insight are the result. Acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of these characteristics, along with individual values, allows for change and balance in the legal life.

References

- David Hall, *The Spiritual Revitalization of the Legal Profession: A Search for Sacred Rivers*, www.sacredrivers.neu.edu
- Susan Daicoff, *Lawyer Know Thyself, The Lawyer Personality and the Stress of Law School*, Presentation Florida Coastal School of Law Fall 2005 www.fcsl.edu/faculty/scla99.html
- Steven Keeva, *Transforming Practices, Finding Joy and Satisfaction in the Legal Life*, McGraw Hill, 1999
- Starzynski, John, *Do I think and Act Like a Lawyer or a Normal Person? Can they be the Same?* www.olap.ca
- Talbott Recovery Campus, Atlanta, Georgia, *Critical Issues in Treating Chemically Dependent Attorneys*.

If you believe that you or someone you know would benefit from peer counseling and support, contact OLAP. You can reach program manager Leota Embleton at 1-877-576-6227 or volunteer executive director John Starzynski at 1-877-584-6227.