

How to Create a Good Attorney-Client Relationship

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How to Create a Good Attorney-Client Relationship? Foster an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, and be honest about achieving all your client's goals.

By Paul M. Graziano, Family Lawyer



As an attorney whose practice is exclusively dedicated to family law, I have learned that maintaining a good working relationship with a client is critical to the ultimate success of the case – and an essential component of achieving the client's goals during representation. The importance of establishing and maintaining a good working relationship with your client, from commencement through to conclusion, cannot be overstated.

Establishing a good attorney-client relationship starts during the initial consultation. At the outset, the attorney should create an atmosphere of trust, identify the potential legal issues involved in the case, elicit facts and circumstances from the client that are relevant to the legal issues, and most importantly, assess the client's credibility and make a determination as to whether the attorney and client can work well together to achieve the client's goals.

Trust is earned; it takes time to build trust and create a comfort level for the client, and that process starts at the commencement of the engagement.

Creating a Good Attorney-Client Relationship: Start with the Initial Consultation

The initial consultation provides an opportunity for both the attorney and prospective client to get to know one another and decide whether the relationship will be effective and productive. Attorneys have different styles and "bedside manners" in terms of how they interact with their clients and work with them on legal matters. Not every attorney is a good fit for every client, and not every attorney will share the same opinion or perspective on how best to handle the client's matter. It is critically important – both during the initial consultation and throughout the case – to set and continue to manage the client's expectations as to the outcome of contested issues.

During the initial consultation, clients often ask the attorney to render a legal opinion regarding specific issues in their matter. An attorney can provide a general framework of potential outcomes, but at the inception of a case, it is difficult (if not impossible) to render a legal opinion with certainty as to the ultimate outcome. Clients will rely on their attorney's opinions and analysis, so be judicious when discussing possible outcomes. There is no benefit to anyone in the process if you simply tell the client what he/she wants to hear and fail to fully explain possible outcomes – and what it may take in terms of time and money to pursue the client's goals. The attorney's obligation is to assess the issues and to provide the client with the most accurate analysis possible, including an honest assessment of all the potential outcomes in their case –favorable and unfavorable. Tread lightly, but honesty really is the best policy.

Technology and Divorce

The technology boom has had a significant effect on how clients choose their attorneys. Prior to a prospective client even stepping foot in your door for a consultation, he/she has likely already conducted legal research online concerning his/her case, consulted with other attorneys and/or family and friends about the case, and learned about your professional background and experience practicing law. This can result in the client already having a specific opinion as to how you should handle the case. You need to manage the client's expectations regarding how you intend to handle issues in their matter – and ensure that your client understands and agrees with your strategy.

Much of what can be found on the Internet by way of attorney websites, legal blogs, and open forum discussions are effective in providing a general overview and framework concerning a legal issue or body of law, but lack specificity in regard to the variables and different facts and circumstances that ultimately dictate the outcome of a client's particular legal issues. Given that there is easy access to this

kind of general information, today's litigants self-educate more than ever – but the attorney still has the ultimate responsibility to make sure the client fully understands the issues in their case and the relevant statutory authority and case law that will impact the determination of these issues.



Consider providing clients with specific references to statutory authority and/or relevant case law concerning their matter so they have an opportunity to read and review some of the authority and information you may be relying upon in assessing their case. I encourage clients to be invested in their case: to educate themselves, and to ask questions whenever they are uncertain about any aspect of their case. You should always keep an open line of communication with your client.

Developing and Maintaining a Good Attorney-Client Relationship



After the client has retained you, the focus shifts to further developing and maintaining a good attorney-client relationship. Maintaining the relationship requires diligence on the attorney's part, and also on the part of the attorney's staff. Your staff serves as an extension of you, and your client expects the same professionalism, courtesy, and respect from your office as they do from you. When your staff falls short of meeting these expectations, this reflects poorly on you. Having a good support team is critical to effectively representing and keeping clients happy.

I am often interviewed by clients seeking to hire new counsel to represent them. The principal complaints I hear from clients relate to their frustration in not being able to communicate directly with their attorney, the lack of timely response(s) by the attorney, and difficulty in gaining access to the attorney. Clients expect that their attorney and his/her staff will respond promptly to inquiries or questions, including providing correspondence and/or pleadings received, and keeping them apprised of the status of their case. With the proliferation of email and text messaging, clients expect a rapid response to their inquiries.

Set ground rules with your clients regarding how you will respond to their queries; establish an easy and expedient method of communication between counsel and staff, and specify the manner in which your office will provide correspondence, pleadings, and other written materials received during the pendency of the case. Setting expectations as to how communication will be handled will greatly reduce the possibility of misunderstandings – and help prevent clients from looking for a new attorney.

You need to remember that clients often come to a family lawyer's office at the worst of times. They are nervous, anxious, and looking for guidance. To create an effective and productive attorney-client relationship, you need to foster an atmosphere of mutual trust and honesty, establish ground rules for communication, and manage the client's expectations regarding the potential outcome of their case. Ultimately, your responsibility is to advocate on behalf of your clients, provide guidance and recommendations to them, and formulate a plan to achieve all realistic goals. Successful representation requires establishing and maintaining a good working relationship with your clients.

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