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Navigating Generational Differences

by 2017 Fellow **Kristin Gray**, 2015 Fellow **Annie Chuang**, and 2011 Fellow **Kassem Lucas**

What are the biggest assets you see more junior attorneys bringing to your organization? How are they adding value to your clients?

Kristin Gray: In my experience, more junior attorneys are very eager to learn and quick to embrace new technology, which helps us meet client needs more efficiently and stay on the cutting edge.

Annie Chuang: This generation is the most technologically savvy. They see the benefit of technology and incorporate it into the work they do for the firm and our clients. They bring an efficiency to their work that technology affords them.

Further, I see our junior attorneys bring a can-do attitude to our law firm. They are smart, hard-working, and driven to succeed, which means they demand meaningful opportunities earlier. If law firms give younger attorneys more opportunities and greater experiences, that benefits all involved. Clients get less expensive yet qualified attorneys, and the younger attorneys are challenged and satisfied with their experiences at the firm, which hopefully equates to retention.

Kassem Lucas: Junior associates continue to impress me in many respects, but where they stand out most is in the areas of diversity, technology, thinking outside the box, responsiveness, and adaptability.

Dealing with junior associates means I will come across many different people from different perspectives and backgrounds. They come with new ideas on how to use current resources and bring to the table new resources that they believe will help further our goals, particularly with respect to technology. This often means that they are not willing to do the same thing, the same way, over and over again.

Largely due to technology, they are accustomed to quick responses, and I often received answers in various ways, including by text. Lastly, they are often confronted with senior partners who are set in their ways, and my experience suggests that they are willing to adapt if necessary, but will often express new ways to do things. They are the gateway to making the law profession more diverse and making it a much better and technology savvy profession.

When more senior attorneys seem annoyed with millennials, what are their complaints? If justified, where should younger attorneys be willing to “give” to be seen as better members of the team? If unjustified, are there alternative ways younger attorneys can reach the same results without being dismissed as “those millennials” or “the next generation”?

KG: As an employment attorney, I have the pleasure of assisting clients on issues across various industries. A common generational issue I see in a wide variety of clients' workplaces is that more senior team members want to see millennials take more ownership over their work product and be more proactive. For example, more senior team members sometimes complain that, while millennials are quick to jump on a task, once assigned to them, they would like to see millennials anticipating those next steps without having to be assigned them.

AC: While it is also a positive (see first question), junior attorneys sometimes demand opportunities before they are ready for them. If they lack the skill set to succeed, it harms them personally, and more importantly, it does a disservice to our clients. Sometimes it feels like this generation demands instant gratification, but discipline and patience are needed to acquire the proper training and skills before taking on a big project, argument, or position.

Another “complaint” I’ve seen is the characterization that associates have no desire to become partner at the firm and instead crave work/life balance to pursue their other interests. I think for a firm to succeed, we must all work as a team, and everyone needs to be viewed as a “team player.” Even if the younger attorneys crave work/life balance, they need to find a way to show that they will be and are there for their team; they need to be willing to do what needs to be done, regardless of the task. If younger attorneys demonstrate that they can be counted on during the important times, trust is built among the team.

KL: Senior attorneys tend to complain about the need to provide instant and/or constant feedback, lack of face-to-face communication, and failure to invest long-term in the law firm. As I often tell young associates, I think of being an associate at a law firm as a game. You have volunteered to play the game by accepting employment. Thus, you have to find out what the rules of the game are and then play by them to progress. If the partners with whom you work like to have face-to-face contact, you should oblige. If they want you to show an interest in being at the firm longterm, you should illustrate that behavior.

But what I also tell them is, the best way to change the rules of the game is to put yourself in a position to change the rules, by progressing and ultimately becoming one of the people who sets the rules of the game. Thus, while you must often play by rules that you do not like, unless you are being asked to do something unreasonable, you should progress at the firm, develop good relationships, be a good firm citizen and then suggest ways to chip away at the rules you do not like. And once you are in the position to set the rules, you should avoid perpetuating the same behaviors that you did not like coming up.

Can you discuss some strategies you've seen mid-level associates/more junior in-house counsel use to successfully change the way their organizations address challenges (internally or with clients) or lead cultural changes within your organization?

KG: As a Gen Xer, I have been impressed by millennials' general willingness to speak up when they have ideas or suggestions. As Chris De Santis discussed with our Fellows group, he was fascinated to find that a surprising number of millennials grew up having a say in the planning of their family vacations, which is a far cry from previous generations' experiences. Millennials grew up having a seat at the table, so to speak, and it shows in their readiness to speak their minds.

AC: I've seen that our junior attorneys are more vocal in their wants and needs, whether it is flexibility, mobility, or just more meaningful work. When done in a collaborative and team-building fashion, it can lead to positive changes that benefit the firm as a whole.

I've also seen our associates take the initiative to set up a meeting with the partners/decision-makers involved in order to address a problem. As an example, our associates wanted to have a discussion about associate salaries. They gathered as much information as they could to present the relevant facts/grounds, which then led to an open discussion regarding salary issues. These same associates believed that it wouldn't have been as meaningful a discussion if they weren't willing to make the effort and put in the work to be informed on a complicated issue.

KL: The one thing that comes to mind is the creation of affinity groups at my firm. When I was an associate, we had no affinity groups (except a women's group that was developed in my third year). But when I became the Partner in Charge of Diversity, associates petitioned to have affinity groups. Since I came up without affinity groups, I appreciated the commitment and reasons associates presented to me for why the firm should have them. Now the firm has seven affinity groups and growing. They have definitely changed the culture of the firm and both partners and clients appreciate having them.

By 2018 Pathfinder **Holly Lar**

When given opportunities to lead, how do you use your "youth" to your advantage?

Holly Lar: I know that I work with extremely experienced attorneys, all of whom are readily willing to teach and guide me in these early stages of my career. When I have opportunities to lead a project or initiative, I try to meet with each of them to get their perspective and concerns. I'm not sure I would get the same level of input if it weren't for my "youth," and oftentimes I feel like this guidance plays an integral role in deciding the direction I take in leading the team.

Do you have any examples of times where a fresh perspective has been exactly what your organization needed?

HL: I think data and technology are incredibly important aspects of practicing law. Since joining my team, I have often pushed to take advantage of the technology and information we have available at Walmart to improve our support of the business. While I think there is always room for improvement, I do believe our team has a much more transparent insight into our workload and has taken significant strides in managing our budget.

Any examples of times when your fresh perspective was dismissed or rebuffed?

HL: Of course! But I don't take it personally. In most instances, our team is looking for solutions to problems that have arisen. Because of the scale of our business and the amount of work our team manages, it is impossible for any of us to know everything about every area and every country. Therefore, my "fresh perspective" may not actually be suitable because it would have a negative impact in an area/country that I may not even be aware of. The key is for me to find out the "why." As in life, rejection is merely an opportunity to learn and grow.

2017 Fellow **Kristin Gray** is Counsel at Ford & Harrison LLP. She represents management in labor and employment matters in the courts, in arbitration, and before government agencies. Her main practice area is employment litigation in both state and federal courts, and she has experience with multi-plaintiff litigation. Kristin serves on the Board of Directors for Girls on the Run Spartanburg and Habitat for Humanity Spartanburg, and volunteers as a running buddy for Girls on the Run Spartanburg.

2015 Fellow **Annie Chuang** is Partner at Shook, Hardy & Bacon L.L.P. She has more than 20 years of extensive trial and management experience in litigation involving the automotive, technology, pharmaceutical, health care, food and beverage, and tobacco industries. She is also a member of Shook's Artificial Intelligence Task Force. Committed to giving back to the larger community, Annie has served on the board of the Asian American Bar Association of the Greater Bay Area and has provided legal advice to low-income Asians as a volunteer at the Asian Legal Clinic.

2015 Fellow **Kassem Lucas** is Partner in the Trial and Dispute Resolution Practice Group in the Philadelphia office of Pepper Hamilton LLP. He concentrates his practice in complex commercial litigation, reinsurance law and arbitration, insurance counseling, and insurance insolvency. In 2011, Kassem was named Pepper's Partner in Charge of Diversity. He is also a member of the firm's Associate and Hiring committees.

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