

Ten Hallmarks of Professionalism



Thomas C. Rombach



One of the privileges of becoming State Bar president is speaking to the incoming students at Michigan's five law schools.

Every lawyer remembers the sense of awe and nervousness that accompanied the first days of law school. To help new arrivals visualize their future in the legal profession and its attendant responsibilities, former State Bar President Edward Pappas started the Bar's Professionalism in Action program in 2009.¹ The program, patterned after a curriculum created by the State Bar of Louisiana, is now conducted in every law school in our state.

The Professionalism in Action program typically begins with introductions from the law school dean and a State Bar leader, and includes keynote remarks by a prominent lawyer or judge. Other distinguished lawyers and judges recruited by the law school lead groups of approximately 10 students in discussing hypothetical situations highlighting predicaments in either law school or practice in which the students may find themselves. The students envision how they may react in such scenarios, and the legal

practitioners explore an appropriate course of action using their wisdom and experience as well as the Michigan Rules of Professional Conduct.

At the invitation of our state's law schools, I have presented my thoughts on professionalism to first-year students.² I thank deans Don LeDuc of Western Michigan University Thomas M. Cooley Law School, Joan Howarth of Michigan State University College of Law, Jocelyn Benson of Wayne State University Law School, Phyllis Crocker of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, and Mark West of the University of Michigan Law School for their partnership in our program.

I savor the opportunity to repay the myriad seasoned practitioners who always know more than I do and continue to advise me of the proper path to take. Since I cannot pay them back in kind, I am compelled to help guide the next generation of lawyers, who will inevitably surpass my knowledge at some point as well.

For your consideration, I offer my presentation on professionalism—not as a final word, but as a starting point for discussion among my colleagues, many of whom are far more learned and thoughtful on this topic.



Thirty years ago, I sat in the seat where you sit. Or perhaps a medieval equivalent.

Law school has changed a great deal since then. One thing has remained constant, though. Like me, you have the opportunity to obtain an excellent legal education.

Don't allow the myth that there are too many lawyers deter you. Yes, we have more attorneys in the United States than ever before, but our society has become far more complex and far more dependent on legal

relationships. In fact, most surveys show that Americans have greater *unmet* legal needs than ever before.³ So one thing is clear: our country can always use one more *great* lawyer.

To become a great lawyer, you will need to work long hours, late nights, and early mornings. You will toil for yourself and the benefit of your family. Your law school diploma will be the accomplishment of a lifetime.

Your grades and academic achievements will be important. But above all else, you will be judged by your fellow students and future colleagues on one important characteristic. That one secret for success in the legal field is professionalism.

We all realize that professionalism involves ethics and integrity. But beyond those concepts and the semester of law school in which they're taught, what other hallmarks define professionalism?

I will share with you the 10 hallmarks of professionalism that I have aspired to achieve:

1. Be impactful.

- Make a difference. If "80 percent of life is just showing up," *do more*.
- *Try hard*. No one remembers the law student or lawyer who doesn't care. Worse yet, no one forgets the law student or lawyer who doesn't care.
- Keep in mind the three rules of success at trial: preparation, preparation, and preparation.

2. Hold yourself to a high standard.

- In performance. In ethics. In integrity.
- *Try harder*.

3. Forgive yourself when you fall short.

- Learn from your mistakes. Don't become known for your failures. Use them to achieve success.

The views expressed in the President's Page, as well as other expressions of opinions published in the *Bar Journal* from time to time, do not necessarily state or reflect the official position of the State Bar of Michigan, nor does their publication constitute an endorsement of the views expressed. They are the opinions of the authors and are intended not to end discussion, but to stimulate thought about significant issues affecting the legal profession, the making of laws, and the adjudication of disputes.

Don't allow the myth that there are too many lawyers deter you. Our country can always use one more *great* lawyer.

- *Keep trying.* (Example: Thomas Brennan Sr. lost five elections before becoming the youngest Michigan Supreme Court chief justice. He later resigned and founded Western Michigan University Thomas M. Cooley Law School).⁴ [I use a different example at each law school.]

4. Be honest.

- Your reputation will follow you throughout your professional career.
- Look around this room. Look around the state. Although Michigan has more than 44,000 licensed attorneys, there are far fewer than six degrees of separation between any two of us. I would be willing to bet that any two lawyers in this room can be connected by an attorney who knows each of them well.
- Own your failures. Don't blame your shortcomings on others.

5. Keep your word.

- Follow through. Meet deadlines (or extend them).
- Strive to be on time.
- Manage the expectations of your clients and others who depend on your performance.
- Don't overpromise.

6. Be civil.

- Follow the Golden Rule.
- We can disagree without being disagreeable. Be polite and courteous.
- Respect other points of view. Try to understand other perspectives.
- Celebrate diversity and inclusion.

7. Communicate with others.

- Keep other people informed. They will appreciate your efforts.
- Say "thank you."

8. Don't talk out of school.

- Don't betray confidential communications.
- Don't gloat.
- Don't talk down about others.

9. Take time for yourself. Be a better family member and friend.

- Relationships are difficult to maintain.
- Law school is three years of your life. You may be a lawyer for the rest of your life.
- Real life will impose its will on you, your family, and your friends. (Example: Last term, a student had a grand mal seizure in this very room and had to drop out of law school. With further treatment, he hopes to return to school soon.)

10. Help others.

- The ABA pro bono standard encourages each lawyer to donate 50 hours of legal work or \$500 each year.
- Before graduation, you may qualify for an externship program in the legal community.
- Volunteer in your community as well. It may lead to your first job or your first client. (Example: One of my relatives volunteered as a youth football coach. A prominent billionaire's son was a player on his team, and he developed a close friendship with the boy's father.)
- Consider serving the profession through involvement in a bar association.
- Your service will always be of greatest benefit to *you*.
- You are blessed to be in these seats today. Please share that blessing with others.

I look forward to following your progress in law school and admiring your accomplishments as attorneys. Most of all, I anticipate your achievements as *professionals*.



Of course, I elaborate on this script when I speak to law students. And, obviously, the 10 hallmarks of professionalism are aspirational goals. As such, my personal favorite is number three: "Forgive yourself when you fall short." I believe the distinguishing characteristic of all great attorneys is that they are constantly learning and constantly striving to improve. I also emphasize in my presentation the importance of maintaining the professional relationships that make lawyers so valuable to our society and our clients.

As attorneys, we all understand professionalism. We know it when we see it. How would you discuss the topic of professionalism with first-year law students? How can I improve my presentation? I would love to hear your ideas. I can be reached by e-mail at tomrombach@aol.com, on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/pub/tom-rombach/11/5b/5a>, or on Twitter @tomrombach. ■

ENDNOTES

1. See Agius, *State Bar of Michigan "Professionalism in Action" Program Expands* <<http://www.examiner.com/article/state-bar-of-michigan-professionalism-action-program-expands>>. All websites cited in this article were accessed January 26, 2015.
2. Other lawyers and judges have also spoken at these events. I did not address the University of Michigan Law School at its Professionalism in Action program this academic year, but counseled its first-year law students during the National Association of Women Judges Mentor Jet program coordinated by 36th District Court Judge Katherine Hansen.
3. See Legal Services Corporation, *Documenting the Justice Gap in America: The Current Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans* (September 2009) <http://www.lsc.gov/sites/default/files/LSC/pdfs/documenting_the_justice_gap_in_america_2009.pdf>; see also National Legal Aid and Defender Association, *Access to Justice Support Project* <http://www.nlada.org/Civil/Civil_SPAN/SPAN_Library/document_list?topics=000055&list_title=State+Legal+Needs+Studies%3A+Reports>.
4. Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_E._Brennan>.