

Achieving a Position of Influence in Your Legal Career: Strategies for Becoming Influence with Clients and Colleagues

By Prof. Ben Sachs
University of Virginia School of Law
President, The Landing Group
March 28, 2019

As attorneys, our success depends on our ability to build positions of credibility and influence with our clients. Whether at a law firm, a nonprofit, in government, or working in-house, we strive to shape the direction for our organizations based on our legal experience. Yet time and time again, we have all seen that having “good ideas” is not enough. Why is it that two attorneys can have the same basic idea, present that idea to similar audiences, and yet only one of the attorneys wins them over? In other words, if the quality of our ideas is not the only factor that makes us successful legal influencers, what other factors are at play, and how can we position ourselves to maximize each factor, and accordingly, our influence?

Many attorneys believe this topic is not teachable. The most common objection is from attorneys who assume that being “influential” is simply a function of your wits, your title, your years of experience, and your charisma. If that is true, then “being influential” cannot be “learned,” because individuals have little control over these attributes. The guidance in this article would be as helpful as advising a high school student to perform better on the SAT by being smarter.

Demystifying topics like these is my educational passion. I have spent much of my career as a lawyer, business executive, and professor giving structure to important but difficult-to-teach topics, and I began my consulting firm, The Landing Group, to provide educational training to help lawyers and other professionals. Specifically, I focus on how people can become great leaders, great team managers, great negotiators, great communicators, and great public speakers. In doing so, I hope to help individuals grow—not just in their substantive skillsets—but in their ability to connect with others to make change happen for the teams, their organizations, their clients, and their careers.

Naturally then, I will begin our topic today by demystifying what makes attorneys great influencers. We will start by breaking down the sources of attorneys’ power and influence. In this article, I will argue, based on my legal and business experience as well as psychological studies of influence, that a diverse set of qualities and circumstances affect our ability to be effective legal influencers for our clients and colleagues. And yes, these factors are within your control. Second, I will provide a roadmap with careful steps laid out for becoming a more influential attorney. But a roadmap by itself is not enough, in much the same way that a football team does not win championships by reading a playbook. In the third section of this article, I will attempt to break down the roadmap into actionable, tactical guidance that you can put into practice. Finally, I will close with recommendations on how to take this extensive set of actionable tactics—which may seem overwhelming—and set priorities so you can build your legal influence methodically throughout your career.

The goal of this article is to help you position yourself to maximize your influence with clients and colleagues over the long term. No tricks, no gimmicks—just concrete guidance to demystify what elevates attorneys ... into changemakers.

I. Sources of Attorneys’ Power and Influence

Power begets influence. When people think of influence, they are often actually thinking of power, such as that of a boss or CEO. So we start there, breaking down the sources of power and influence broadly and then seeing how these concepts apply to attorneys.

Most people think of “power” as a function of one’s title or position within a company. Certainly, being the General Counsel or CEO carries significant power, and those individuals are more likely to be influential because of their specific role. But this form of power—known as “legitimate” power—is only one form of power.

Consider six well-understood sources of power:

Type of Power	Definition	Examples
Legitimate Power	Comes from an individual’s role or position	A boss can assign work; a police officer can pull you over
Reward Power	Comes from ability to provide a reward	A boss can increase pay; the mayor can give you an award
Coercive Power	Comes from ability to punish, instill fear	A boss can cut pay; a judge can hold you in contempt and send you to jail
Expert Power	Comes from knowledge and skill	A former prosecutor knows how charging decisions are made; a chef knows how to cook the perfect steak
Information Power	Based on access to information (as gatekeeper)	A partner with direct client access; an analyst extracting data from a database
Referent Power	Comes from personal traits we like and respect about someone, e.g., charisma	A well-liked partner can extract favors; a friendly customer gets a special discount

Source: *Organizational Behavior*, Chapter 13.3 (2017 ed.), available at <https://open.lib.umn.edu/organizationalbehavior/>.

Examining the above list, we are reminded of the many different forms that power can take. The general counsel certainly carries “legitimate power” as a function of her title, but in practice, is that actually why the General Counsel is able to exert so much influence?

I have personally seen the limits of this thinking. I have watched as senior ranking individuals in my own company, even those with such titles as “vice president” with a direct reporting line to the CEO, fail to get buy-in on their ideas and fail to become effective advocates for their teams. In short, they lacked influence despite having quality ideas, direct access to executives, and powerful titles.

To see why, consider the most common tactics of influence. But before we do, let’s stop to clarify the distinction between “power” and “influence.” Think of “power” as something one bottles up, like the potential energy stored in a spring coil. By contrast then, “influence” is the kinetic energy released when one exercises their power to persuade. Influence is simply power in action. There are many ways to exert influence, just as there are many different sources of power.

Psychologists have studied influence and found some remarkable insights. We begin with the tactics themselves. Consider nine common tactics of influence:

Tactics of Influence

- **Rational persuasion** (based on facts, data, and logic)
- **Legitimizing** (appeal based on legitimate position)
- **Personal appeal** (we enjoy saying yes to people we like)
- **Exchange** (give-and-take trading)
- **Ingratiation** (personal flattery)
- **Pressure** (threats or persistent badgering)
- **Coalition** (group working together/peer pressure)
- **Inspirational appeals** (tapping into values and emotions)
- **Consultation** (asking target for help to trigger ownership and commitment)

Source: Falbe, C. M., & Yukl, G., “Consequences for Managers of Using Single Influence Tactics and Combinations of Tactics,” *Academy of Management Journal*, 35, 638-52 (1992).

All attorneys should be familiar with these tactics. The first, rational persuasion, is an attorney’s bread and butter. Day in and day out, we research and assemble information into arguments meant to persuade others. It should be no surprise then that attorneys would lean most heavily on this tactic. In fact, the general population also relies heavily on rational persuasion, because as human beings, when we are trying to influence others, we focus on the merits of our arguments about all else.

Psychologists’ studies of influence support this very conclusion:

Tactic	Frequency of Use
1. Rational persuasion	54%
2. Legitimizing	13%
3. Personal appeals	7%
4. Exchange	7%
5. Ingratiation	6%
6. Pressure	6%
7. Coalitions	3%
8. Inspirational appeals	2%
9. Consultation	2%

But this is where things get interesting. After cataloging how often these tactics are used, researchers then attempted to learn which tactics were most effective at getting buy-in—also known as “commitment”—from others. The results were startling:

Tactic	Frequency of Use	Result		
		Resistance (“No!”)	Compliance (“Fine!”)	Commitment (“Yes!”)
1. Rational persuasion	54%	47%	30%	23%
2. Legitimizing	13%	44%	56%	0%
3. Personal appeals	7%	25%	33%	42%
4. Exchange	7%	25%	33%	42%
5. Ingratiation	6%	41%	28%	31%
6. Pressure	6%	56%	41%	3%
7. Coalitions	3%	53%	44%	3%
8. Inspirational appeals	2%	0%	10%	90%
9. Consultation	2%	18%	27%	55%

Source: Falbe, C. M., & Yukl, G., “Consequences for Managers of Using Single Influence Tactics and Combinations of Tactics,” *Academy of Management Journal*, 35, 638-52 (1992).

As the above data shows, the tactics of influence upon which people lean most heavily often result in the most resistance.

This research helps solidify four key takeaways that help shape this article:

1. It’s not enough to be right: *how* you influence is as important as the *quality* of your ideas.
2. Title isn’t everything: the best influence is *earned*, not bestowed.
3. Getting buy-in often requires *collaboration*.
4. Understanding *networks* can help unlock influence.

In other words, most of us are wrong in how we think about influence. Influence is not simply a function of titles, gray hairs, or brilliant arguments. We need a different way to think about influence so that we can craft guidance for attorneys to best position themselves to guide their clients and colleagues through their legal expertise.

II. Introducing a Framework for Building Legal Influence

If we are to provide attorneys a framework for building legal influence, we need to ensure it suits attorneys’ particular needs. In my view, an effective framework should do several things:

- ***It should position you so others seek your opinion more often.*** After all, for you to be a changemaker, you need to be in the room where changes are made. Breaking down the door is one way, but it is far better to be invited to sit at the table.
- ***It should position you to generate ideas that are more likely to be adopted.*** Having a seat at the table does not guarantee others will agree with you. Our framework will need to provide guidance on how to source and hone your ideas for maximum adoption.
- ***It should be flexible enough for diverse legal career paths.*** A good framework should work for individuals at law firms, in-house, in government, and more.
- ***It should be concrete and actionable.*** We don’t need platitudes and inspirational speeches. This is about doing.
- ***It should grow with you, working across all stages of your legal career.*** Our framework should follow you from the day you graduate law school to retirement, recognizing the sharp differences in expectations for junior associates, senior associates, partners, management, and so on.

The framework I propose below attempts to address all these concerns. But enough preamble. I’ll start by presenting the general framework, and then I’ll take a step back to explain how it works, and more importantly—why.

The framework is built upon four key pillars that, if mastered, will position an attorney to maximize their influence on clients and colleagues:

Pillar of Influence	How does this help an attorney build legal influence?
1. Be reliable	If others learn they can rely on you, they will seek your counsel in challenging times.
2. Be a connector	Your ideas are more likely to be adopted if you understand how all the pieces (and people) fit together.
3. Be adaptable	Making change happen isn’t just about ideas; it’s about helping people overcome fear of change.
4. Be open	If you have an open leadership style, people are more likely to trust you and your opinions.

As you can see, each theme serves to build and solidify your position influence. But the meat of the framework is in the details. It is easy to *assert* that attorneys who can “connect the dots”

across complex workstreams will position themselves to be more influential than those who do not; the challenge is *teaching* attorneys how to get there.

Luckily, each of the four pillars of influences *can* be taught. And as you grow in your career, you will need to reach new heights on each pillar. After all, the goalposts for a junior associate are much different than they are for a senior partner or general counsel.

With that in mind, we’ll add one more dimension to our framework: tenure. Depending on whether you are just beginning your career or reaching more advanced stages, this framework can offer different guidance. With that, our framework will be truly ready to meet the needs of attorneys at all stages.

In fact, our framework is more than a framework: it’s a *roadmap* for building legal influence.

Roadmap for Building Legal Influence

	Experience		
	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable	Deliver timely, accurate work for every request	Start with “yes” and volunteer for more	Become sought-after for legal experience or expertise
2. Be a connector	Connect the dots within legal tasks (spot dependencies)	Connect dots across the case team (drive collaboration)	Connect dots across the client or firm (cross-functional connections)
3. Be adaptable	Be open to change	Help others handle change	Lead conversations about change, even for your own role
4. Be open	Ask for help	Embrace 360 feedback (receiving and giving)	Coach others through their own difficult conversations

On the left side of the roadmap, we have our four central pillars: be reliable, be a connector, be adaptable, and be open. Across the columns, we have three levels based on your experience: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. The idea behind this roadmap is that you should always be trying to grow in all four pillars on the left, and as you become more advanced in your career, you will move from left to right as well.

By following these steps, an attorney can—in my view—have dramatically more influence and impact on their clients and colleagues. In the next section, I will explain the roadmap step by step, with tactics and examples that can apply to attorneys of all shapes and sizes.

III. Applying the Roadmap for Building Legal Influence

In this section, we'll move from left to right and from top to bottom across the roadmap above, stopping systematically at each stage to provide advice tailored for attorneys seeking to expand their influence with clients and colleagues.

Our first pillar is about reliability.

A. Be Reliable

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable	⊕		
2. Be a connector			
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			

Be Reliable: Beginner

Deliver timely, accurate work for every request

Fundamentally, being “reliable” is about building your brand as a “go-to lawyer.” When you are just starting your career, you will focus on effectively executing small work assignments, since this is how you earn bigger responsibilities. Whether these assignments are internal projects, research memos, or even seemingly menial tasks such as document review or creating binders for litigation depositions, you must assume each task will reflect back on you and how your colleagues view your readiness to take on larger tasks.

Some attorneys find this frustrating. After all, how does working on document review or creating trial binders have anything to do with whether you deserve bigger opportunities, such as taking a deposition or arguing a motion before the trial court? But every year, I watch individuals fail to earn the next “big assignment” because, in their attempt to seek out bigger projects, they let “the little things” slip. You may think you are just focusing on more important priorities, but others are expecting you to manage both the little things and the big things with no loss in productivity. If they see you fall short, even on the less important tasks, they will find it tempting to conclude that you are not ready for more responsibility. And getting more responsibility is a key prerequisite for building influence.

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable		⊕	
2. Be a connector			
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			

Be Reliable: Intermediate

Start with “yes” and volunteer for more

Young attorneys seeking to expand their influence need to make themselves indispensable to clients and colleagues. While this goes without saying, few attorneys think about how they will actually attain this level of usefulness. In addition to delivering great work that others request from you, you will want to volunteer—and do so early and often—for new assignments. Most attorneys, especially junior attorneys, are used to others coming to them with requests. As early as possible, great attorneys will break themselves of this narrow mindset.

But there is another nuance to bring out here. It is always easy to volunteer for the “fun” or “challenging” assignments; great team players are willing to take on much more. Document review is a classic example. Being willing to roll up your sleeves and take on additional work, from document review to creating binders to helping with cite checks in a pinch, helps build an attorney’s reputation as a team player on any case team.

Of course, your time is limited, and I am not suggesting that you will be able to take on every project out there, at least not without losing your sleep, your family time, and eventually, your mind. This is where the phrase “start with yes” has its moment in the sun. Imagine the following conversation with your supervisor:

Supervisor: The client raised an issue about how their business plan would be affected by the new law being considered in the Senate. I know it seems a little off-topic, but we need to try to answer their question. Can you take this one?

You: Yes, I’m happy to help. I’m working on wrapping up the corporate structure documents right now. Should I push that back while I work on this new question?

Supervisor: We can’t push that timeline—we’ll still need that done by Friday as well.

You: Got it. Can we streamline our response to the client’s new question somehow? Perhaps just provide an initial view and promise a more thorough review once the law is out of committee?

Supervisor: Possibly.

You: Alright, why don’t I do a “quick version” of the answer and run it by you. If you think that initial view is too cursory, we can try to figure something out. We could also try to bring in another team member to help here.

The point of this dialogue is to demonstrate a few points. First, you are starting with “yes.” The word “yes” isn’t literally necessary; what matters is that you showed eagerness to help right from the start, demonstrating a can-do/can-help attitude despite having a heavy workload. While you might be tempted to start with, “I can’t do that because of this other project you have me doing,” by starting instead with “yes,” you are showing yourself to be a team player.

Second, although you started with “yes,” you are not ending the conversation there. You ask follow-up questions designed to help make your supervisor a partner in solving your team’s collective problem, namely, the problem of how to get all of this work done on time. If, at the end of this back-and-forth, you and your supervisor concluded that taking on this additional assignment would jeopardize the more pressing core project, such that it is best to have another team member take the new assignment, then you and your supervisor will have reached that conclusion *together*. Your brand as a team player remains intact, even if you end up not taking on the additional work.

Here are some other examples of how you can maintain a positive attitude and start with “yes,” despite steering the conversation toward turning down the request later:

- *Reframing the request into a question of who is the right person for the job:* “Sounds interesting! It’s not an area I’m familiar with, but I’d love to learn more. It would probably take me some time to get up to speed. If you want an answer faster, should we see if someone from that practice group can weigh in?”
- *Reframing the request into a question of timing:* “I’d love to help. I do have a pressing deadline though right now. Could we discuss it next week instead?”
- *Reframing the request into a question of priorities:* “I agree that topic should be on our radar. Here are the other topics we plan to tackle. Where do you think this new topic fits? Should we tackle the others first and return to this one if there is time?”

Remember, in this section, we are building your brand as a go-to lawyer. Go-to lawyers are always in high demand. If people come to you for help, and you cannot serve them, you want them to leave feeling like you were eager to help but for these other constraints on your time. If they feel you become defensive when asked to help with new work, they will be less likely to seek your advice on the more interesting, more pressing challenges later, which in turn limits your scope of influence.

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable			⊕
2. Be a connector			
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			

Be Reliable: Advanced

Become sought-after for experience or expertise

To complete your brand as a go-to lawyer, you will want to establish areas of specialized knowledge or experience. While this may seem obvious, there is some nuance to how you build your legal experience.

First, look for areas with no clear expert in your team or organization. While you may be thinking here of substantive legal topics, such as securities law or employment discrimination, there are not the only areas you should consider. Other potential areas for you to develop useful expertise may include:

- Experience in special procedural areas (e.g., developing expertise in electronic discovery)
- Assisting with the maintenance of your law firm’s internal systems (e.g., billing, conflict management, professional development, client document management)
- Deep familiarity of specific client verticals (e.g., manufacturing, biotech) or specific functions within your company (e.g., marketing, product development)

The key here is to recognize that even being the go-to-lawyer in your firm for something that may seem dry, such as conflict management, helps augment your reputation for usefulness. In fact, taking on niche areas can be a stepping stone to larger management responsibilities and provide you a seat at management’s table.

Once acquired, an attorney should be looking to demonstrate this expertise for colleagues or clients. Consider presenting at conferences or giving CLEs. Host internal presentations or share memos and materials outlining what you have learned or developed. Think of it this way: if an attorney develops expertise in a forest, and nobody hears it, it does not make a sound.

B. Be a Connector



	Proficiency	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable			
2. Be a connector	+		
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			

2. Be a Connector: Beginner

Connect the dots within tasks (spot dependencies)

Great attorneys know how to connect the dots across tasks, across teams, and across organizations. The first step is to spot dependencies with your individual assignments.

For any new legal assignment, seek as much context as possible. Read previous work or filings from the matter, and ask your supervising attorney for whatever material is available. Conduct additional research online if the matter is public. As you review this work, make a list of questions and set up occasional meetings with your supervisor to answer these questions in batches. (You will not want to pepper your supervisor with constant questions, so batch your questions to avoid letting your curiosity become a burden for others.)

Most attorneys starting a new assignment will focus on getting only the information they need to complete the project efficiently. That sort of thinking—while understandable—is terribly limiting. Instead, you should look to understand the big picture – how this case fits into the broader matter and the client’s priorities overall. This broader information will help you unlock legal strategies and insights that others might have missed, not to mention help you prioritize your work and address blind spots because you will better understand how this project fits into broader goals. If you are a manager already, you know the value of having this broader context to help you manage surprises and spot new opportunities; this 10,000 foot view is invaluable. As a junior member of the team, you can (and should) seek to get this same perspective.

One additional mistake junior attorneys make when handed a new assignment is in the way they work. In particular, most new lawyers start the task at the top and methodically work their way down until the project is completed. When they spot an issue, they turn their attention to researching the issue thoroughly, continuing on once they have what they need.

This approach is flawed because it effectively assumes all issues are equally important and equally difficult. Of course, this is never the case. For example, imagine you are given two

weeks to research how new financial regulations may affect your client’s consumer banking business. If you start at the top and research each regulation thoroughly until you completely understand how it impacts the client before moving to the next in the set, imagine what happens if the last regulation turns out to be the most obtuse and most controversial. You might find yourself near the deadline for the assignment only to realize that you need more time to make this regulation your central focus, but alas, you have already wasted time on regulations that are far less important without having realized it.

The better approach would be to conduct what I call a “speed run” through the assignment. In a speed run, you would give yourself a finite amount of time—say, two hours—to complete the assignment in its entirety to the best of your ability. This amount of time should intentionally be ridiculous, a small fraction of what is actually needed. At the end of those two hours, you will not have anything close to a polished answer, and you will have numerous unanswered questions. But that is not your goal in these two hours; instead, your goal is to produce work that is “complete but not finished.” The work is “complete” in that you have identified all the major issues or have sketched out a brief answer to each question, but the work is not “finished” in the sense that no answer has sufficient depth or confidence behind it yet to deliver to the client.

Note that if you find yourself having spent two hours on the speed run, but you only have addressed the first issue, you are doing it wrong. The speed run is all about taking a cursory glance at every aspect of the assignment—that is, you must manage your time for breadth, not depth.

Your client will never see this work. But this exercise, because of its time constraints, is outstanding for forcing you to keep a 10,000 foot view of the matter, spot the major issues, identify the thorniest legal questions, and most importantly, give you confidence about how much time it will take to go back and “finish” the assignment in its entirety.

In all the years I have seen people conduct this exercise, I have been blown away by the reactions. Not only does this help attorneys prioritize their work more efficiently, but it reduces attorneys’ stress by giving them visibility into how difficult and time-consuming this task will be far before the deadline looms ominously over their heads. This allowed them to budget their time against other assignments and set a more predictable schedule for themselves.

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable			
2. Be a connector		⊕	
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			

2. *Be a Connector: Intermediate*

Connect dots across the team (drive collaboration)

As you become better at seeing how all of the pieces of your legal tasks come together, you will be able to apply these same techniques to your team, helping synthesize and make connections across multiple workstreams. But first, you have to understand the other workstreams, which means venturing outside your silo.

Many attorneys like to “knuckle down” and focus on their work alone, recognizing the value of a divide-and-conquer approach. This reminds me of a refrain heard all too often in the halls of any law firm or company: “stay in your lane.” While a tempting thought, over years of watching people grow in their careers, I can think of few game-changing attorneys or other professionals who followed this advice. In fact, the most successful and influential people are the ones who are constantly exploring outside their silos and bridging gaps and insights across the organization. Understanding other workstreams will allow you to make connections about legal strategy, legal risks, and opportunities for clients or for your organization in ways that “staying in your lane” will not.

If you are ready to remove those blinders, there are a few simple tips to help you engage team members. First, take the time to ask other team members what they are working on—be curious. When you see drafts of others’ work fly around on email, pause and read their work to stay up to speed. If you see they are swamped, offer to help. Finally, for more advanced connectors, look for ways to position yourself as a hub for the team. For example, you can help build the team’s roadmap or “tracker” file (often a spreadsheet used to indicate who is working on what, the status, and due date) to coordinate workplans. Or, if the team is struggling with something and wants input from the “boss,” offer to help synthesize the team’s questions or proposals for the boss’s review.

Of course, tone is everything. Earnest attempts by attorneys seeking to help their colleagues can be misconstrued as invasiveness. Your goal here is to be helpful, curious, and humble, not arrogant, bossy, or intrusive. As you learn—and more importantly, as you show a genuine willingness to help others—you will slowly get the credibility to weigh in on others’ tasks. Soon, they will be seeking you out for your help and ideas, and your sphere of influence will grow.

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable			
2. Be a connector			⊕
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			

2. Be a Connector: Advanced

Connect dots across the client/firm (cross-functional)

As associates become partners, or as you become more senior in your organization, the challenge to “connect the dots” expands to a whole new level. Here, you will want to think cross-functionally and cross-organizationally. But to make these connections, you will have to explore far outside your comfort zone, and perhaps beyond your traditional legal scope.

For example, imagine you are advising a client on GDPR, a relatively new statutory framework in the European Union dealing with online privacy that has resulted in considerable complexity for e-commerce companies based in the United States that also do business in Europe. One of the hardest-hit functional areas in any company from GDPR is the marketing function; GDPR places limitations on their tactics for tracking and emailing customers in many important ways. As an attorney, you can provide them advice on GDPR compliance by explaining the statutes, but how much better would that advice be if it comes from an attorney with deep marketing understanding, someone who truly understands the pain points of digital marketers? For

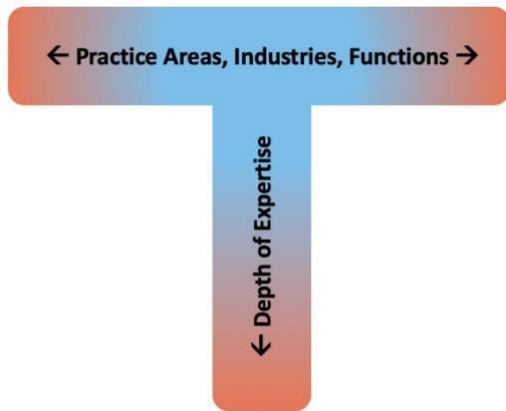
example, can you communicate about such critical marketing concepts as customer acquisition costs, the customer funnel, and remarketing? Can you explain how GDPR affects these marketing strategies and priorities? Imagine for a moment the enormous credibility and influence you would have advising an e-commerce company if you could truly speak the language of your client's marketing department so knowledgeably. You would make yourself indispensable.

Attorneys who develop this deeper understanding of their clients' business (or their own business, in the case of in-house counsel) add dramatically greater value than those who do not. In short, they earn the highest positions of influence. When they present ideas, they have not only more credibility, but the quality of their ideas is better because their legal advice is deeply grounded in business or industry understanding. These are the attorneys who become rainmakers—or even become CEOs themselves.

Attaining this level of proficiency is difficult, but it is within the reach of any attorney willing to put in the time. When you have this goal in mind, think long-term. It all starts with having regular meetings outside your typical circle. For example, to grow your influence at the firm, have regular meetings, such as quarterly one-on-ones or lunches, with senior people outside your practice area. With clients, ask your contacts to help you make introductions, such as meeting vice presidents in other areas. While building these connections can also help you sell business, do not make the mistake of entering these meetings with that goal; it will backfire. The purpose of these meetings is to *ask questions*: ask what people are working on, ask about their priorities, and more importantly, ask about the challenges of their work. People love talking about their work, but if they sense you are merely trying to “network” for the sake of making a sale, rather than being genuinely interested in their experience, they will smell a rat. I cannot repeat this enough: focus on learning, and stay curious.

Not all of this research has to be done in-person. Research your client's (or your company's) industry as well, such as by following press mentions or setting up news alerts. Research competitors and read analysts' reports. Find articles discussing the industry's trends and challenges. Imagine you were an investor in this company and wanted to understand it well enough to gauge the risks and rewards of investing; this is exactly the kind of information that will make you a better attorney to advise this company in the future, and your depth of knowledge will shine in every client interaction.

In the last two sections, we have talked about being “reliable” and being a “connector.” These themes come together in an important way. Indeed, *this is all about building your “T,”* a commonly-used depiction of career growth in many industries. As an attorney, you could think of “building your T” this way:



As shown in the diagram, the horizontal bar of the “T” is about building *broad* knowledge across the business or client; this is what makes you a “connector.”

The vertical bar of the “T” represents your building *depth* of knowledge, which helps you become a “reliable” go-to attorney.

In your career, you always want to look for ways to expand your “T” in both directions, horizontally and vertically, to augment your skillset and your influence.

C. Be Adaptable

Our third section focuses on adaptability. In truth, this is really about a single threat to your being an influential changemaker: the fear of change. Overcoming the fear of change yourself and then translating this skill to guide others through periods of change is a critical unlock for anyone trying to drive change in an organization.

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable			
2. Be a connector			
3. Be adaptable	⊕		
4. Be open			

3. Be Adaptable: Beginner *Be open to change*

As attorneys, we must often help guide our clients through difficult periods and face seismic shifts in strategy, in personnel, in risk mitigation, and other contexts. We cannot do our jobs well if the fear of change prevents others from hearing or implementing our legal advice.

Before we can coach others, however, we have to look inwardly. Change is hard for most attorneys. For example, consider any of these common curveballs faced regularly by attorneys:

- ✦ New facts coming out in discovery
- ✦ Unexpected rulings or client crises
- ✦ Team members get pulled off the case
- ✦ Changes in leadership
- ✦ Changes in strategy
- ✦ Client suddenly shifts priorities

Such change often triggers anxiety and frustration—perfectly natural emotional responses. Start your journey of being a change agent by thinking about how you can best handle these curveballs yourself. All attorneys have felt these pains before; ignoring these emotions is an impossible task, like the vain psychological exercise of attempting to forget the word “elephant.”

Instead of pushing these emotions out, acknowledge them internally and give them space, much in the same way you would acknowledge the feelings expressed by a friend venting their concerns to you. Skipping this acknowledgment and trying to problem-solve requires impossible psychological gymnastics; your brain is not wired well to do both simultaneously.

When the changes are caused by someone else, such as a boss or client, the risk is great; you may be tempted to react in the moment, and the odds are high that your initial reaction may be fear-based and reactive instead of open and productive. The fix: slow down the process. Before deciding what to do next, take a break (e.g., ask for time to think). During this period of reflection, if your instinct is to be frustrated with them (whoever they are) for causing this change, pause and consider the situation from their point of view. What reasons could you imagine for their decision? Stay open-minded and look for reasons to support the change, even embrace the change, or better yet be a *champion* for the change... instead of *fearing* the change. This will make you a more effective attorney, able to stay nimble in handling these unexpected legal crises.

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable			
2. Be a connector			
3. Be adaptable		⊕	
4. Be open			

3. Be Adaptable: Intermediate *Help others handle change*

Now that you are better equipped to handle change, you can start to guide others through change as well. When they vent their frustrations about surprises in the case or matter, focus on responding with empathy, not problem solving.

This empathy-first deescalation technique is as old as it is overlooked. To see it in action, let’s take a departure from the law for a moment. Consider a young couple, the wife coming home from a long day of work and venting to her husband about her boss’s sudden shift in priorities. Will you jump into problem-solving mode, or will you spend time listening and expressing empathy? Hopefully, those who pick the first option are comfortable sleeping on the couch. Savvier partners will avoid this trap and focus on showing empathy before shifting into problem solving.

Returning to the legal world, think about how this dynamic plays out in your teams. On any case team, there may be individuals seen as the “glue” that hold the other attorneys together through difficult times. By being that glue, you can help your team maximize productivity and problem solving efforts. Ironically, the greatest way you can do this is not by problem-solving yourself but by giving them sufficient space to express their emotions, calm down on their own, and then naturally move back into a problem-solving state.

After big changes happen, especially those that cause significant friction or anger, you may also consider conducting a more formal “retrospective.” Often abbreviated as “a retro,” this is a great tool used by leadership teams to learn from mistakes made in the past and to show teams that leadership is listening. For example, you might use a retro to unpack why a settlement conference that should have been productive devolved into chaos and hostility, or you might use a retro to reflect on why an important client discontinued your services. These moments should be analyzed coolly and carefully, looking for learnings, not become gossip about around the watercooler with finger pointing and sniping.

If this process is new to you, consider some suggestions for running an effective retro at your firm or organization, based on my years of observing and running these kinds of processes at my own company.

Typical content of a retro:

1. **Context:** Why did we make the decision we made?
2. **Decision-making:** What was our decision-making process (e.g., who was involved, what info did we review, what alternatives considered)? What went well, and what would we do differently?
3. **Rollout:** What was our process for implementing the decision? What went well, and what would we do differently?

Guidelines to keep in mind:

- Avoid “blaming” – this is about what happened and how to do better next time, not who was at fault
- Ask everyone for input (e.g., group discussions, anonymous surveys)
- Share the output with everyone affected by the decision, not just the decision-makers

	Progress	Implementation	Advanced
1. Be reliable			
2. Be a connector			
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			

3. *Be Adaptable: Advanced*

Lead conversations about change, even for your role

Ideas are cheap—or so the saying goes. What really matters is execution. That is why we have been discussing how to build your credibility for helping others through difficult changes, because the fear of change is so often such a difficult roadblock to achieving buy-in for your bold ideas. But there is one last ingredient necessary to cement your credibility when proposing bold changes: humility. In particular, you have to be willing to propose changes that are not in your personal best interests.

Imagine for a moment that you are the leader of a niche practice area in e-discovery at a law firm. Perhaps you feel that the firm’s practice areas are too narrow and too numerous, and you

want to recommend that the firm consolidate practice areas so that each can be more prominent in the minds of the firm’s clients. But doing so could mean that your own practice area falls first.

Most attorneys would scoff at cannibalizing their own “power” in such a way as this. Why propose a new idea if it could end up diminishing the practice area you helped build? But being willing to acknowledge—indeed, being the first one to *suggest*—changes to your own role as part of a larger idea can clinch your long-term reputation as someone who puts the organization’s interests above your own interests.

In my experience, individuals who hold on tight to protect their power in an organization eventually end up sidelined as the organization evolves around them. People spot “empire builders” a mile away and abhor office politics, so if they disagree with your direction but are afraid to challenge you, they’ll do the next best thing: they’ll go around you. Sooner or later, you will end up on an island, reduced to irrelevance. On the other hand, those who are open to change and willing to cannibalize their own areas of responsibility by offering to yield space to others always seem to find themselves in new, more prominent roles of influence and credibility after all is said and done.

In short, self-protection is self-defeating. As an attorney, your career will grow and evolve. You must lead this change or get left behind. Ideally, when people think of you, they will think of you as the one who always says, “I’m happy to do whatever is best for [the firm/organization].” Your respect and influence will grow to new heights through such commitments.

D. Be Open

So far, our journey has made us more reliable, better able to make connections between projects and people, and more adaptable to the changing landscape of our legal careers. The final pillar in our roadmap for building influence lies in a deeply rooted quality of leadership that separates good leaders from great ones: the ability to be “open.”

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable			
2. Be a connector			
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			+

4. Be Open: Beginner *Ask for help*

Why does being open matter? Researchers at Google studied what separates good teams from great ones. Was it team members’ resumes? Their experience? The variety of talents in some perfect mathematical combination? They expected to find these ingredients at the top of the list. But as it turned out, the single most important predictor of teams’ success was something far subtler: the extent of each team’s *psychological safety*.

When we speak of psychological safety, we are talking about team members’ willingness to take risks, to be vulnerable, and to be honest with one another. In short, we are talking about trust.

But the trust we speak of here is not about “trust falls” or other elementary school games; we are talking about the kind of trust that allows colleagues to lean on one another, support one another, and give each other honest, constructive feedback—all in the name of improving each other and the team. If you think this trust does not matter, stop reading now. Pick up a book about leadership and teamwork, whether written by a military general, CEO, or psychologist. You will have a hard time finding one written in the last twenty years that does not discuss trust as a core ingredient in successful teams.

But applying these principles to legal teams is no easy thing. Attorneys are competitive and often independent people, yet they also must work in teams, where the team’s goals must be put above individuals’ goals. If a team has years getting to know each other deeply, they will form great bonds of trust. But we do not have time for that in most of our organizations, and even if we did, there is a difference between “personal trust” and “professional trust.” We do not need our legal team members to be best friends who share secrets; we need our teams to be able to give each other honest feedback and hold each other accountable without being defensive. This is what professional trust is all about.

If you are going to be an influencer, you need people to trust you. Trust cannot be manufactured or demanded; it must be earned. So where do you start? Counterintuitive as this may be, the best way to earn trust is to give trust to others, and then allow time to receive trust in return.

Building trust starts with modeling vulnerability. Most attorneys like to show that they are in command of their work, and being vulnerable makes them uncomfortable. That is why you rarely hear team members saying things like:

- ✦ What do you think of my idea?
- ✦ Can you help me?
- ✦ How could this be better?
- ✦ Here are the things I’m trying to improve...

Most attorneys assume that if people have critical feedback, they will provide it, so there is no need to ask peers “what they think.” Surely opinions will be freely given, since we are all professionals... right? But most people feel it is not their place to offer unsolicited feedback. They are worried about making others defensive, so they focus instead on maintaining a “good relationship” by avoiding anything that might trigger confrontation or negative feelings. In other words, they focus on self-preservation—that is, preservation of their reputation with you—rather than the team’s goals of creating the best work product. This is what holds back good legal teams from becoming great legal teams.

This is why you have to model vulnerability and ask what others think. If you are a supervisor, this is especially important. When was the last time you sent a draft of your work product to your junior team members and explicitly asked them what they think?

Having these kinds of open conversations—that is, modeling vulnerability—starts a chain reaction. Others on the team will respond in kind and open up as well. Pretty soon, your whole team is working together on a new level of effectiveness because you are invested in each other and in the team’s success in a deeper, less self-interested way.

1. Be reliable			
2. Be a commentator			
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			

4. Be Open: Intermediate

Embrace 360 feedback (receiving and giving)

Our road to becoming a more open leader in our legal teams and organizations has only just begun. Next, we need to embrace feedback.

I am struggling to think of any process that is so common in the business world but so terrifying to the legal world as the “360 feedback” process. In such a process, one gets feedback from their boss, their peers, and their direct reports. Very few law firms embrace such an open process because attorneys fear hearing unproductive venting and complaining that will simply bog them down. In fact, I can count on one hand the number of senior partners in a law firm who have ever suggested to me that they think other partners would embrace such a process. Yet, outside of law firms, 360 feedback is a common feature in countless modern companies, especially tech companies and virtually any company seen on any magazine’s “best places to work” list.

If psychological safety is a core ingredient to successful teams, a successful 360 feedback program is its manifestation. If you want to be a change-maker, but people do not feel comfortable giving you honest feedback, you will always have blind spots. These blind spots will be well known to others in your circle and will shape their feelings about your effectiveness as an attorney, but they may remain unknown to you for months, years, or even your entire career.

But 360 feedback is about more than just receiving feedback. Just as important is your ability to give feedback to others, even if this means having difficult conversations. Think of it this way: how can you expect to have difficult conversations about bold changes for your clients or for your firm if you cannot even have a difficult conversation with individuals in your inner circle about their performance?

You do not need a formal 360 feedback program to implement these practices. On every team I have led, I always make a point to create a 360 feedback culture myself and check in with each member of the team to ensure feedback is happening in every direction. Start by talking to your team members about your goals: that you want the team to deliver honest feedback on a regular basis. Then, set up a process to ensure it happens: schedule recurring, dedicated feedback meetings every 4-6 weeks with each person who reports to you, and encourage other team members to do the same. Tell participants you want feedback—in fact, tell them you *expect* them to come with constructive feedback—to set expectations that saying “all good boss!” is not acceptable.

Despite these overtures, they may nevertheless come empty-handed to your feedback meetings. This is an incredibly important sign, because it almost certainly means they do not yet feel psychological safety. After all, is it truly reasonable to assume that the absence of feedback means we are perfect team members? Of course not. Just as we discussed in the last section, you will need to build their trust by modeling vulnerability. For example, consider “seeding” the conversation with suggestions about things you know you can improve upon. Ask about your recent work product or about a recent meeting and point out the things that did not feel right to you, and then ask for their advice.

If team members do provide feedback, avoid the temptation to defend or explain your actions. Remember how hard it is for them to be honest with you, and reward their attempt to give feedback—even if they do so clumsily or inarticulately—with your gratitude and your commitment that you will try to improve. Over time, you may be able to ask questions when you hear something you do not agree with, but by and large, such attempts will be seen as signs that you are defensive and not open to feedback, so proceed carefully. Build a strong foundation of trust first.

Remember this common adage: people don’t quit their jobs—they quit their *bosses*. By building a strong culture of feedback, you will ensure you are avoiding blind spots and earning the loyalty and trust of your fellow attorneys.

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable			
2. Be a connector			
3. Be adaptable			
4. Be open			

4. Be Open: Advanced

Coach others through difficult conversations

Our final step in the roadmap requires translating your openness as a leader to help team members resolve conflicts with others who are not open. In other words, you are going to use your talents to coach others through difficult conversations.

We all know those attorneys at our firms or senior people at our organizations that everyone goes to when they are entrenched in some kind of interpersonal issue and do not know where else to turn. These saviors—these “organizational diplomats”—seem to be the only ones who can grease the wheels in a difficult situation or can jump in headlong to resolve the most challenging organizational crises. And most importantly for our purposes: they are supreme nodes of influence.

These diplomats did not attain their reputations overnight, and they certainly did not win this respect solely because of title; indeed, we have all known individuals with fancy titles in organizations who are lousy diplomats that entrench—rather than unlock—conflicts. Instead, these reputations are won by earning the trust of key individuals across the organization. These individuals almost universally embody the principles of open leadership through active listening, conflict management, and humility.

Active listening and empathy are central to open leadership. If people come to you for help, you have an opportunity to build your reputation as someone who can broker solutions that get everyone on board. Do not look at these opportunities as “quick wins” where you will simply railroad others into an agreement. Nor should you always seek some “split the difference” compromise that simply makes all sides “equally unhappy.” Instead, your goal should be to dive deep into the conflict and find its roots.

I have used the word “diplomat” here, but in many ways, the word “negotiator” is more apt. I have been teaching courses for lawyers and law students on negotiation for many years, and I am always amazed at how the principles of negotiation apply so well to organizational conflicts. Great negotiators resolve conflicts by treating opponents as collaborators, not enemies. They reframe attacks on people as attacks on the problem. I could spend considerable time on this subject, but cramming my semester-long law school course on negotiation into a few paragraphs here would be a fool’s errand. Instead, I will provide a few examples that highlight how a negotiation mindset can unlock conflicts.

Let’s start with a non-legal example known as the “orange story,” an anecdote well-known in negotiation education. Imagine two chefs at a fancy restaurant, one being the executive chef and one the pastry chef. They learn that a famous celebrity is coming to dinner tonight, so they take a moment to think of what they each want to make. Once they decide, they both run to the pantry to get their ingredients, and each simultaneously puts a hand on the last orange. They both need the orange for their recipes, so what do they do? (Pause dramatically while audience members shout out answers.) They could flip a coin, but conventional wisdom says to “compromise,” that is, to divide the orange in half. So, the executive chef takes her half of the orange and gets as much zest as she can to liven up her duck entrée, then throws the rest away. The pastry chef, similarly disappointed but trying to make do, juices her half of the orange as much as she can to use the juice in her orange cake, and then throws the rest away. (Pause to watch the audience’s faces as they realize what has happened.) “Aha,” they say! In hindsight, we see that the chefs actually needed different parts of the orange, and both chefs could have had everything they wanted.

The lesson of the orange story for negotiators is to reframe *positions* to *interests*. Each chef has a *position* in the conflict—“I need the orange”—but that position is really just a function of each chef’s *interests*, namely the “why” behind each position. The chefs engaged in positional bargaining when they should have discussed their deeper interests and seen the opportunity for a more creative solution. Reframing positions to interests is fairly simple: just ask, “Why?” If the chefs had asked each other *why* the other wants the orange, instead of *assuming* the other wants the orange for the same reason, they might have realized they have slightly different, yet entirely compatible, interests.

Imagine this same situation at a law firm where mid-level attorneys are at odds over who will take the key deposition in an important case. Both want the opportunity. By asking each other why they want the deposition, they might learn that they have slightly different interests. Perhaps one simply wants to satisfy a gap of deposition experience on a formal review, while the other

wants more exposure in front of the partner on the case. With this knowledge, they suggest new ways to satisfy each other's interests without giving up the deposition. For example, perhaps the attorney wanting deposition experience could take the next few depositions in a row, or the attorney wanting exposure with the partner could take the lead on building the upcoming client presentation, which will require several rounds of review with the partner.

Negotiation theory can also unlock client conflicts. Imagine you have been negotiating a settlement for your client, the plaintiff in a fraud case, and despite having the defendant agree to complete financial restitution for the fraud, your client still is not satisfied. Your client demands you keep pushing until the defendant is forced out of business. This demand sends the parties into a stalemate. What your client has done is to state a position: wanting the defendant out of business. As an attorney, it is your job to shift the conversation from the client's positions to the client's interests. Ask the client why putting the defendant out of business is so important. Do not assume the issue is one of revenge; in fact, do not assume you know the client's mind at all. Ask the question, and go from there. Suppose the client says that the principal concern is making sure the defendant can't cause this harm to others in the future. Now you can brainstorm with the client other ways to satisfy this interest without the defendant being put out of business. Can the defendant agree to publicly change its policies? What about agreeing to independent monitoring? How about a contingency whereby a lack of compliance can result in additional financial penalties? Had simple "revenge" been the true answer, you might have offered a completely different set of creative alternatives. By shifting from positions to interests, you can become a world-class problem solver.

Similar kinds of conflicts arise all the time in law firms and organizations. Whether caused by office politics, differences in strategy, or different visions for the organization, people will look to you as an attorney to step in and find a path forward. Remember: your goal is not to reach a "compromise," so to speak; while that might resolve the conflict, it might end up with a watered-down outcome. Your goal is to find a solution that maximally satisfies *everyone's* interests through creative, outside-the-box thinking. If you can navigate this terrain, you could find you are the most influential person in the organization.

You might think we have lost the connection to open leadership, the topic of this section. But that is not the case. Those who get embroiled in conflicts often become locked in their own positions and are unable to open themselves up to hear about others' interests or ideas. Open leaders do not get entrenched in conflicts; they pivot conflicts to collaborations. Freed from the blinders imposed by self-preservation, open leaders become able to solve the most challenging problems, especially the ever-exhausting "people problems."

If people trust your leadership in these kinds of conflicts, you will find yourself at the center of the most important decisions—the epicenter of influence. As an attorney, earning this reputation will ensure that people call on your advice in the most difficult times.

IV. Next Steps

Building influence as an attorney requires placing yourself in a position where your clients and colleagues *seek your advice more often* and embracing the tools that improve the *likelihood that your ideas are implemented*. Each of the sections in our roadmap helps support one of these objectives:

Pillar of Influence	How does this help an attorney build legal influence?
1. Be reliable	If others learn they can rely on you, they will seek your counsel in challenging times.
2. Be a connector	Your ideas are more likely to be adopted if you understand how all the pieces (and people) fit together.
3. Be adaptable	Making change happen isn't just about ideas; it's about helping people overcome fear of change.
4. Be open	If you have an open leadership style, people are more likely to trust you and your opinions.

To put these ideas into practice, return to the roadmap and use it as a scorecard to identify the areas where you are strong today and the gaps you are working to fill. Which of these elements do you want to work on over the next 12 months?

Roadmap for Building Legal Influence

	Experience		
	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
1. Be reliable	Deliver timely, accurate work for every request	Start with “yes” and volunteer for more	Become sought-after for legal experience or expertise
2. Be a connector	Connect the dots within legal tasks (spot dependencies)	Connect dots across the case team (drive collaboration)	Connect dots across the client or firm (cross-functional connections)
3. Be adaptable	Be open to change	Help others handle change	Lead conversations about change, even for your own role
4. Be open	Ask for help	Embrace 360 feedback (receiving and giving)	Coach others through their own difficult conversations

Start by selecting 2-3 blocks in the roadmap above to improve upon over the next year. Consider putting a checkmark on the boxes where you feel you are already strong so you can identify the boxes where you still have opportunities to improve. Then create an action plan with concrete steps for how you plan to make progress in those gaps. I recommend focusing on two, or at most three, areas to improve at a time, because otherwise the roadmap can feel overwhelming.

Once you have your goals for the next year, take some time to turn your goals into concrete actions. Tips to consider:

- ➔ Tell your colleagues about the areas you are working on and ask them for their ideas on how to achieve your goals. Not only might they give you good ideas, but by enlisting their help, you may also make them your champions.
- ➔ Seek out continuing legal education classes or seminars on soft skills, such as team management, leadership, negotiation, conflict resolution, and feedback. All of these skills will serve you well as you climb our pillars of influence.
- ➔ Set aside an hour each week to “drop everything and read” (a classic K-12 staple, known as “DEAR” time), to catch up on news and trends in your practice area or industry. This is becoming more and more popular in fast-moving industries, such as technology companies, to encourage employees to stay ahead of the curve.
- ➔ Map the influencers in your firm or organization and seek them out to learn about their career path and get their advice.
- ➔ And of course, consult the appropriate section of this article for more ideas.

Most importantly, repeat this process every year as you grow, perhaps setting aside a day every January to review your progress and set new goals.

Your legal career will not stand still, and neither should your level of influence. By embracing this roadmap and putting these ideas into practice, you can become a more influential attorney with your clients and colleagues, ensuring you have meaningful impact your entire career.

* * *

I welcome ideas and feedback from my readers and training participants. Contact me at ben@thelandinggroup.com with questions, suggestions, or comments about this topic or any of the other topics I teach. You can learn more at www.thelandinggroup.com.

About the Author



Ben Sachs, President of The Landing Group, is an expert in communication, negotiations, and management. He is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Virginia School of Law ([profile](#)) teaching negotiations, public speaking, ethics, and management communication, and he provides communication consulting and coaching services for legal and business professionals. Ben's clients have included government and private sector organizations in the United States and Australia in industries ranging from telecommunications to retail, where he has specialized in retail negotiations and management strategy.

Ben's professional career spans law and business, first serving as a litigator at Sidley Austin LLP and then as a strategic management consultant at the Boston Consulting Group before moving to Storyblocks, a stock media distribution company repeatedly named among the fastest-growing companies by Inc. magazine. At Storyblocks, Ben serves as general counsel and chief operating officer, overseeing the departments responsible for marketing, content acquisition, customer retention, and corporate strategy.

Ben earned his B.A. as an Echols Scholar and Jefferson Scholar at the University of Virginia and his J.D. from the University of Virginia School of Law, where he graduated Order of the Coif and a member of the Virginia Law Review. After law school, he served as a law clerk for Judge. T.S. Ellis, III, in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia in Alexandria. Ben is a former mock trial national champion and mock trial coach, winning the W.W. Reynoldson Award for outstanding coaching in 2008. He currently lives in Washington, D.C.