

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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R-E-S-P-E-C-T

My parents got divorced when I was young, and one of my favorite memories of growing up is when my dad came to pick me up, along with my older sister and younger brother, for our annual trip to Minocqua, Wisconsin, where he lived.



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My dad has always loved great music, and I vividly remember hopping into the car and immediately asking for Aretha. I particularly wanted to hear my favorite song — “Respect.” I never had much of a singing voice, but I could sure belt that one out, even at age 8.

Since my dad lived five hours away, my mom raised her three kids with the help of her parents, who lived two miles away. Although Aretha’s song really did not teach me anything about respect, between my grandparents and my mom, I learned at an early age to be respectful. And not “just a little bit,” like in the song.

One thing they taught me is to respect my elders, and I have tried to do that my entire life. But right now I am focused on respecting those of a different generation, particularly the youngest members of our association.

For years, we have attended sessions at ALA conferences and chapter meetings, hoping to learn how to work with the younger generations. We learned what each generation wants and expects. We put everyone in a bucket based on age, and then we make assumptions.

Frankly, I don’t like to categorize people, and I definitely don’t want to do it at ALA. All of our members want current and relevant education. All of our members want to network with each other. Sure, some of our younger colleagues network in different ways than I do, so we need to focus more on technology. And I need to spend some time learning my social media options.

“One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say.”
— Bryant H. McGill

But let’s face it — we don’t always treat our younger members with the respect that they deserve. They are told they need to “pay their dues.” (And I’m not talking about membership dues.) But to that I say, why can’t they contribute right away?

Our younger members are told they need to be mentored by the seasoned professional legal manager because they can't possibly know what is needed to run a law firm. Unfortunately, many of those relationships are one-sided. I love being a new member "buddy/mentor," because I learn so much from our younger members, too.

Our younger members are looking to try new things. We tend to focus on legacy programs instead of driving innovation. Our challenge is to avoid the words, "We've always done it this way."

The worst thing is that I repeatedly hear our younger members being referred to as "the kids." But if you put yourself in their shoes, think how disrespectful that must sound.

In 2015, the Association Laboratory Inc. published a white paper titled, "Engaging Young Association Members — A Strategic White Paper for the Association Industry." In the section "Challenges to Young Professional Engagement," we learn that "Too many senior association members fail to view young professionals as industry or professional participants. When young professionals are treated as 'kids,' they are less likely to be interested in engaging with the association. Young professionals are often frustrated by the perceived dominance of discussions by more senior members of the association, industry or profession."

The study further mentions that we need to eliminate disrespectful words. If we refer to our "young professionals in derogatory language (newbie, rookie, etc.) focusing on the 'young' instead of the 'professional,' younger professionals will be less enthusiastic."

In ALA, we hear from chapter leaders about low engagement from younger members. In employment settings, there are research studies that show a direct correlation between high respect and high engagement. I challenge us all to show each other more respect.

I joined ALA when I was 27. I remember being very intimidated by our seasoned administrators. But a few of them showed me respect, and that's all it took. I am forever grateful.

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