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## OUT of ORDER

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### Lessons Learned: 30 Years of Law Really Is ‘Practice’

by KATHLEEN J. WU

Coming up on my 30th anniversary in law, I’ve found the word “practice” aptly describes my career. This milestone got me thinking about what I’ve learned over the course of three decades, both as a lawyer in general as well as a woman of color in the legal profession. Now is as good a time as any to share those lessons learned:

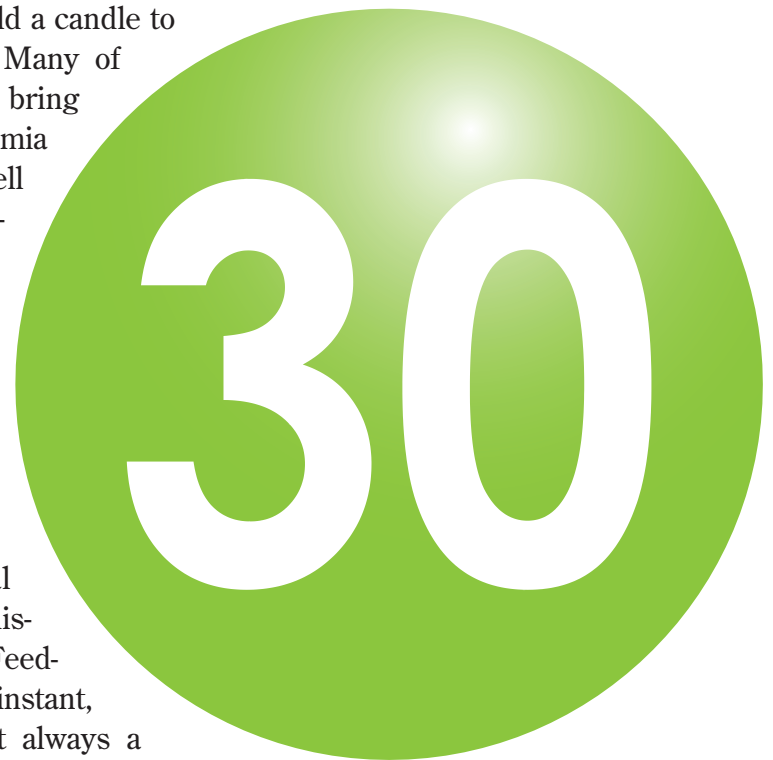
#### PRACTICE OF LAW

1. *Don’t take criticism personally.* Especially when just starting out, young attorneys won’t know everything. Actually, they won’t even know most things. That will be a new feeling for most lawyers, since they are typically overachievers who have excelled academically most of their lives. But the rigors of high school, college and even law

school don’t hold a candle to practicing law. Many of the skills that bring success in academia do translate well to the professional world—discipline, resourcefulness, an ability to go for long stretches without a good night’s sleep—but the real world doesn’t distribute grades. Feedback is rarely instant, and there’s not always a “right” answer. Often, there’s just a “better” answer.

When criticism comes—and it will come—the person delivering the criticism may not always do so in a diplomatic manner. The

partner who’s giving it may be stressed out, and there may be expletives involved, but don’t let that bother you. It’s part of the learning process. Just because a



mistake was made, even if it was a major one, doesn't spell doom for a career. It just means there's more to learn. Don't get defensive or dwell on how the message was delivered. Extract what's needed to learn from the dressing-down and move on.

*2. Create a personal monopoly.* Find a way to differentiate yourself from the herd. It's going to be particularly hard for associates at large firms, but it's crucial to getting interesting work and the confidence of partners (and eventually clients) who are doling it out. There's something you're better at than your colleagues, so find that thing and make it your own.

*3. Find your voice and advocate for yourself.* Ask for plum assignments. Ask for raises. Ask for new challenges. Ask for flexibility with your schedule, if you need it. You're the only person who is truly looking out for you, so don't be quiet and wait to be noticed. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella got in hot water recently when he told attendees at a women-in-tech conference that they shouldn't ask for raises but should have "faith that the system will actually give you the right raises as you go along." That's bad advice for anyone, man or woman. You don't have to be a ruthless self-promoter, but don't assume you have a fairy godmother keeping a list of your

accomplishments and putting them in front of your boss.


*4. Advocate for others.* If you want others to refer you business and speak up for you in meetings, be sure to pay it forward and do it for others first. This is particularly true for women and people of color, who are still the minority in the profession. By helping others succeed, we lay the ground work for our own success.

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*5. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.* There's nothing comfortable about self-promotion or asking for a raise. Nor is it comfortable to be handed a project you have no idea how to complete and be expected to figure it out with almost no guidance. There is almost no end to the list of things you can expect to be uncomfortable about. But here's the good

news: with time and practice, you will get better at all of those things. In the meantime, don't be dissuaded by discomfort.

*6. Don't let the "need for speed" dictate the quality of work.* Lawyers are paid handsomely for their knowledge, but applying that knowledge to a client's specific situation sometimes takes time and deliberation. In even the most urgent situations—actually, especially in the most urgent situations—stop, take a breath, and review to make sure all the bases are covered. Make sure to provide the client the expertise she's paying for. And after sufficient deliberations, proofread the work and make sure it's pristine.

Succeeding as a lawyer is hard, time-consuming work. But after 30 years in the profession, I have to say that it's still one of the best ways to make a living. 



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