

How (and Why) to Be Your Most Authentic Self at Work

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Winston & Strawn Private Equity Partner and Los Angeles Office Managing Partner Eva Davis talks about removing golf from her repertoire of client activities, the perils of always being “on,” and finding a firm where you can be yourself.

As lawyers our jobs can be hard. And lately it’s been even harder because...COVID-19.

The pandemic created all sorts of unexpected havoc—billable work was sparse but there was still enormous pressure to serve clients who were also experiencing an unknown and unpredictable business environment.

We had to be vigilant about our own mental and physical health, along with that of our immediate and extended families, and support our colleagues and teams at work as they tried to do the same.

On top of that, we needed to stay connected in a completely new remote work environment that was the opposite of the collaborative, in-person, office- and team-centric cultures we are used to experiencing in this industry.

And now (and it’s a true silver lining) in many areas, client demand and billable work have come roaring back all at once. Clients need our connected thinking and nimble approach more than ever. In my practice, for example, there is an inundation of deals the likes of which I have never seen in my 30 years in private equity and M&A.

When we experience times like these, we don’t need ‘other things’ making our lives at work more difficult.

Before I joined Winston, one of those other things that made my job unnecessarily hard was the pressure to be perpetually *on*, in a way that wasn’t me. I am sure some of it was self-induced, as a junior attorney trying to fit in, but that wasn’t entirely it. There was just a way I was supposed to be and act as a Big Law attorney that did not feel authentic. This is exhausting (even without the extraordinary demands we’re still going through right now).

As I got more seasoned (ok, older), I realized I just wanted to be ‘me’ at work. I needed to find a place where the pressure to present a certain type of persona wasn’t part of the culture. I wondered if a place like that existed. As I considered the move to Winston & Strawn, it seemed like it, but of course, I couldn’t be sure until I made the leap. Happily, almost immediately, I knew I had found it. I could just be me here.

Even my family noticed the shift. My kids said, “Mom, you just seem happier,” and my husband commented after our first event with a lot of partners in attendance, “they seem normal—no one is puffing out their chest and putting on a show.” No one expects me to pretend to be someone I’m not, with hobbies and interests I don’t have.

It’s true, even in the right place, being yourself at work can be hard, including when dealing with clients. Maybe, like I was, you are the more junior woman working mostly with more senior men, or, you are the newest member of a team of seasoned professionals with established relationships. Regardless though, like me, you can find ways to make it work.

For example, being my true self means I don’t play golf—but I will ski or hike with my clients and colleagues. I will talk about my children with clients who also have kids—especially if they are around the same age. And, over the years, I would include them in activities like a trip to the aquarium or the zoo. As a life-long Girl Scout and former Girl Scout Troop Leader to my two girls (now in college), my annual client gift is still a green box of Thin Mints delivered just before St. Patrick’s Day! Establishing personal touchstones like these becomes easier when you find your most authentic self in all areas of your work.

The interests and priorities that define you may change as you grow from a junior lawyer to a seasoned rainmaker. But what has brought the most ease to my job at every stage is being able to present my true self to my partners, colleagues and clients, and participate in activities with them that represent the real me. I no longer pretend to be something, think something, or like something (like golf, not that there’s anything wrong with that!) just to fit in.

My advice to everyone, but especially the newer lawyers with whom I work and hope to help develop into world-class and well-adjusted lawyers – *you do you*. That will be your greatest relationship building tool, and you’ll be happier for it.

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