



The Wisdom Next Door



An Interview with Leslie Packer

By Ashley K. Brathwaite

For this column, I took the advice of many leadership and professional development experts and interviewed my colleague and managing partner, Leslie Packer. Leslie and I have worked and tried cases together for several years, and I have learned many things from her. Even so, there is still much more to learn from this nationally recognized trial lawyer in the office next door to my own.

Which aspect of leadership have you found to be the most critical? Leslie is a past president of the North Carolina Association of Defense Attorneys and current board chair of Special Olympics North Carolina. She also holds a regional executive position with the American Board of Trial Advocates and is a fellow in the American College of Trial Lawyers. Perhaps most significant is that she has served as managing partner of our law firm for several years while maintaining an active trial practice in product liability and drug and medical device matters.

When asked to think about the most important leadership lesson that she shares with mentees, Leslie identified the value of building consensus. This takes more time than merely pushing to get enough support to take the majority of the votes. Creating a consensus requires listening, which Leslie considers to be the most important quality for a leader. Leslie keeps this quote by Martin Luther King, Jr., at her desk as a reminder of this principle: "A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus."

Have you seen one quality that consistently makes a trial lawyer stand out? In Leslie's experience, skill is important, but preparation is largely responsible for her success. While we have all had cases with tough facts, Leslie reminds herself in these instances that the only way over is through. The more you dig in and prepare, the more ways you will find to present the circumstances in the manner that is best for the client. Bad facts or tough cases create anxiety for the trial lawyer; however, effective trial lawyers have learned to harness that anxiety into more effective trial preparation.

What do you wish that you had known when you started a practice? While Leslie recalls feeling as though she did not know anything about the business of a law practice when she started, her instincts led her to take risks and fear the comfort of the status quo. Her motto is that not taking action could be more of a threat in the long run than the risk that you are considering taking.

An example of this is when lawyers are pressured or feel pushed into a certain practice group or area of the law where they are promised a sense of balance, which is, in reality, far from guaranteed. Put simply, changing a lawyer's work environment does not make great lawyers work less.

Leslie enjoys seeing younger lawyers develop the confidence that they need to bet on themselves and pursue their own interests. Leslie's experience has been that while opportunities may come at a less than ideal time in your career, the practice of law is far from a binary question with only two outcomes, so you have to be open to accept the risk inherent in new opportunities.

What value have you found through your involvement with DRI? The most valuable return on Leslie's investment in DRI is that she met her husband, Tom Packer of Gordon & Rees, at a DRI seminar. In addition to meeting Tom through DRI, Leslie has found it a valuable way to connect with clients and former trial partners. Leslie has also had several new clients find her through DRI directories and speaking opportunities.

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