

DEVELOPING A PROBLEM SOLVING MINDSET AS A YOUNG LAWYER

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1. OVERVIEW

- 1.1 It's okay not to know the solution - but good practice to start thinking about / help define the problem.
- 1.2 As a junior, a large chunk of the work you do will be task-based (your supervisor would have thought about the problem / solution and assigned you a task).
- 1.3 This session will go over the actions you can take to:
 - 1.3.1 be somebody that is problem-oriented, not just task-oriented;
 - 1.3.2 define, manage and solve problems as part of an effective legal team; and
 - 1.3.3 show that you can be trusted to take on more responsibility at work.
- 1.4 Again, focus isn't to put pressure on you to know the solution – it's to show that you're thinking about the problem.

2. BE PROBLEM ORIENTED, NOT TASK ORIENTED

2.1 Take proper instructions to help define the problem

Step 1 – Write down the answers to these five things:

- Background:
 - who are you acting for?
 - any facts you should know?
 - any key documents / emails you should be looking at?
- Deliverables:
 - what does your colleague need from you?
 - what form is the deliverable - email, formal memo, mark-ups to a document, quick chat?
- Timing / budget:
 - when does your colleague need it to review? (don't throw them a grenade)
 - how much time do they expect this to take / what's the budget for your time?
 - prioritize your own workload and deadlines accordingly
- Matter number / File reference? (To bill your time and save documents)
- How does this fit into the bigger picture? (e.g. Where does this particular contract fit in? What are the other parties / stakeholders? How do

Step 2 – Read back and confirm the instructions. Clarify anything that doesn't make sense.

Step 3 – Communicate and update your colleague if anything changes (e.g. conflicting deadline, hit a dead end, new information / documents).

Step 4 - be in the habit of following up in a timely manner, don't assume that your emails to senior associates and partners have been read.

2.2 Taking the next step – what can you do beyond the immediate task?

2.2.1 Draft email / advice to the client?

2.2.2 Other teams / departments that you can contact to help work on the problem?

2.2.3 Anything else that can be done to improve / build on the existing solution?

3. **SOLVE YOUR OWN PROBLEM**

3.1 Don't just pass problems upwards – propose a draft solution:

3.1.1 Is this something I can solve myself?

3.1.2 What can I try to solve this problem?

3.1.3 If it didn't work, why?

3.1.4 What resources can I use to solve this? (e.g. other juniors / mid-level, online resources, library etc.)

3.2 What you can do:

3.2.1 Flag the issue early (pick up the phone) or set up a time to discuss them in one go

3.2.2 Propose a draft solution – show that you're thinking

3.2.3 Follow through and provide updates

3.2.4 Ask colleagues for help – and flag it with your supervisor

3.3 5 degrees of initiative:

3.3.1 Wait until told – [Avoid]

3.3.2 Ask what to do – [Avoid]

3.3.3 Recommend, then take action – [Good]

3.3.4 Act, but advise at once – [Sometimes]

3.3.5 Act on own then routinely report – [Later on in career]

4. **PUSH TO COMPLETION**

4.1 Take responsibility for pushing a given task to completion (or take it to 100%)

4.1.1 For example, if you sent an email to request for information and did not hear back, are there other workarounds you can pursue to get this information? Be creative.

4.1.2 Even if these other workarounds are not used, at least next time if this comes up again you already have solutions in place.

- 4.2 Follow up with your supervisors
- 4.3 Think about your supervisors as the end user, not as a safety net
- 4.4 A good test whether you've taken it to your 100% - are you okay with it being sent on to the client or somebody more senior in your organisation?
- 5. **ASK FOR FEEDBACK**
- 5.1 Ask directly – but be specific and timely
- 5.2 Create compares between the final work product and drafts
- 5.3 The document management system is your friend
- 5.4 Track the feedback
- 5.5 Not just upwards feedback (360 degree approach) – ask people that you are delegating to / working with

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