

PUBLICATION

Linda Klein: The Secrets to My Success

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Linda has been shattering the glass ceiling since she started out as a young attorney. Throughout her career, she charted her own path to the top and developed a list of secrets to success that have proved integral to her ascension. She began her law career by taking a low-paying job that would allow her to do what she loves: litigate. Linda is still doing what she loves many years later. During her career, she has amassed a laundry list of accomplishments that includes serving as president of the American Bar Association (ABA) and as the first woman president of the State Bar of Georgia.

It can be a little intimidating interviewing someone with such an incredible resume. However, as we chatted she made me feel like I was talking with an old friend (without a doubt, one of her secrets to success). With each secret she bestowed on me, I can think back to my own life and how that secret has led to my personal success. The funny thing is the only real secret about these so-called secrets is how effective these tried-and-true nuggets of wisdom are if you take the time to put into them into action.

After reflecting on how I should write about Linda's rise to the top, I decided to distill her advice to aspiring women attorneys into a short list of her secrets to success.

1. **Do the job that nobody wants to do, and do it well.** Linda used this phrase to explain how she was able to gain rich experience early in her litigation career. There are always those cases or tasks that nobody on the team wants to handle. The senior attorney will ask, "Who wants to take this assignment?" and every attorney in the room will shrink within themselves to seemingly become invisible, like in the episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer disappears into the hedge. Where the others were shrinking, Linda stepped forward and volunteered. After the assignment was hers, she made sure to complete it to the best of her ability. If you ask her about this secret, I can almost guarantee she will emphasize the "Do it well" part!

The job that nobody wants to do presents several positive attributes. First, your internal client will be thankful that they do not have to handle the job. Second, the senior attorneys will be happy to provide support because they are thankful that you are doing the job they did not want to do. Last, when you give it 100 percent, it will get noticed because most people tend to spend the least amount of time possible or procrastinate on that loathsome task that everyone avoids.

2. **Allow the law to touch your heart.** Linda explained that it is important for the law to be about more than monetary gains for an attorney to stay energized throughout a long career. It should include those moments where you make a difference in the course of someone's life. Early in her career, Linda helped an elderly woman suffering from Alzheimer's obtain life insurance benefits after the death of her husband. The money was important to helping the woman care for herself. Linda fought hard and the client received the money she was owed. Throughout her career, she has remembered how she felt in that moment and seized opportunities to use her legal skills to assist those in need.
3. **Build a professional network the way that works for you.** Building a network will look different for every person. We all have different interests and different levels of comfort in engaging with others.

Linda is a self-admitted introvert. She chose to start building her network with her local bar association. She started out by serving on committees where she was able to become acquainted with other attorneys on a personal level. Linda served alongside colleagues who would become mentors and friends. Her work with the Georgia Bar Association eventually led to her serving as president for a term.

As Linda's network grew, she branched out and served on committees in the ABA. What started as a small networking adventure in her local bar association eventually snowballed into the prominent position of president of the ABA. She built many relationships along the way.

Linda offered a couple tips if you are in a situation where meeting someone cold in a public setting is the only alternative that presents itself: First, research the person you would like to meet because you probably will have something in common with that person (aka, do your homework). It will be easier to strike up a conversation if you have a common interest. Second, be your authentic self. Authenticity shines through and builds trust in a burgeoning relationship.

4. **Invest in yourself.** Linda has spent her career honing her writing and speaking skills. She has written and presented on numerous topics. These are skills that are only improved through doing. Take the time early in your career to invest in yourself. Raise your hand for the opportunity to write articles about areas in which you would like to practice. The more you can show your knowledge, the more credibility you will have with prospective clients. Although public speaking is not for everyone, it is a skill that everyone can improve on. This will give you confidence when the time comes to give a big media interview or deliver a perfect pitch.
5. **Ask for help when you need it.** When you start out in the practice of law, you will not know all the answers, so ask for help. As you grow into a more experienced attorney, you still may not know some answers. It is impossible to know all the answers! Mentors serve an essential role in this capacity. As my own mentor told me some time ago, "You don't know what you don't know, so ask when you are not sure." Linda shared that mentorship should be a symbiotic relationship through which both parties gain from the relationship. She has had several mentoring relationships that have been key to growing her career.
6. **Document, document, document.** In the transition to the electronic world, attorneys must still find a way to document key client interactions. Linda recalled a time when documentation saved her. She was forced to deliver news to a difficult but important client that the contract on which the case hinged did not favor his case. The client was dissatisfied with this opinion and abruptly told her to stop working on the case. Linda documented his instructions and stopped working on the case. Sometime later, the difficult client began to question why nobody was working on his case. He went as far to raise the concern with senior leadership, which prompted them to look into the client file. Because Linda had developed a habit of documenting client interactions, her boss at the time was able to easily find her notes that showed the client had directed her to stop working on the case. In the legal profession's transition to "the cloud," where note-taking must be more purposeful, find a way to document case details, because doing so just might prevent a mistake or save you from a misunderstanding.