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THE YOUNG LAWYER'S TOOLBOX FOR EFFECTIVENESS "IN THE OVEN".

This piece was born out of reflections on some discussions I had with young lawyers on the “frustrating” nature of practice at law firms in Nigeria. The general census appeared to be that working in a law firm is unrewarding and dissatisfying. Unfortunately, no one had the statistics; the argument was that over 60% of young lawyers (especially male) working in law firms are just there because for the lack of better options, bidding time until the tide turns.

Being a “young” lawyer myself, I introspected on a few of the arguments made and while I hold some of the points to be true, I realise that in many instances the frustration and dissatisfaction stems from the fact that the young lawyer does not deploy the right resources required to make him/her successful.

I liken the young lawyer’s journey working in a law firm to the baking of a cake. The end taste is determined by the ingredients inputted at the beginning and in the course of the baking. Should a young lawyer “in the oven” fail to identify the end and set out to create it by inserting the ‘right ingredients’, the guaranteed end is dissatisfaction.

I reasoned out a mental tool kit which summarizes my assessment from experience and acquaintance with that of other young lawyers. I believe that the young lawyer’s effectiveness and satisfaction will be enhanced by all or any of the following utensils:

ORGANISATION OF SELF

I have found that a lot of the issues we encounter as young lawyers in the course of work arise essentially because we do not organise ourselves. Some of us have habits that do not encourage progress or create an environment that enables us earn the trust of our superiors. In most organisations, the firm is structured like a relay race with the forerunner holding the baton and seeking someone capable to whom it can be passed on. The baton will not be passed where there is no confidence in the capacity of the proposed recipient.

A colleague of mine likened the services of a lawyer to that of a doctor giving diagnoses and medical prescriptions. The doctor's precision or lack of it could be the difference between life and death for the patient. While the lawyer's "patients" often times seem inanimate or imperceptible, the lack of precision, foresight or tact on the part of a lawyer could create long-winding problems for clients both personal and corporate. For this reason, habits such as procrastination, tardiness, disorderliness and ambivalence create that margin of error that could result in practical problems for clients and stagnation for a young lawyer.

The extent of one's organisation as a lawyer largely determines the ambits of success one can attain. So before the labels and discrimination theories are propounded, it is important to introspect and be sure that your hands are on the deck. Essentially, the young lawyer must be organised both personally and at work.

STUDY AND BUILDING OF CAPACITY

Speaking of the late Gani Fawehinmi (SAN), a close relative said, "Every ounce of Gani's success stemmed from his hard work. He was an extremely hard worker. Everyone knew his study time could not be interrupted".

The economy within which we work as lawyers is a knowledge based economy. Our knowledge makes us useful (or not). Often times, lawyers use the adage "God forbid that a **lawyer knows** all the **law**, but a **good lawyer** is one who **knows** where to **find** the **law**" – (**by Lord Denning**) as the excuse for not expanding the base of their knowledge. This adage no longer holds true because you may not even be given the chance to find the law. The market within which we work now rewards more significantly those who appear to know most "or all" (lol) of the law.

You sit randomly in a lobby with a third party and introduce yourself as a lawyer, in three minutes, the person may be asking how aeronautic engineers make knots and bolts and trust me, the expectation is that you have an answer that seems accurate. Clients ask the oddest questions and they want accurate answers **ON THE SPOT** and we must strive to match the expectation daily.

Some useful tips for knowledge effectiveness include:

- Having a fixed study time; at least one hour a day. The time should be spent reading legal content as well as non-legal content;
- Reading one law (any form of legislation) a week;
- Writing. It helps you process information received and completes understanding of knotty matters;
- Joining healthy discussion groups- knowledge shared is knowledge owned.

One last thing, a young lawyer must identify an area in which he/she wants to be renowned as a specialist in the long run. Traffic flows in the direction of specialisation. That is why practice is segmented. Develop a generic knowledge base but specialise as well.

SOCIALISE AND KNOW YOUR MARKET

You are a brand, yes, you, as an individual. You are not a brand of your firm, you are an individual trading in talent. You trade it in at your firm, but there are other fora beyond the law firm which hold opportunity for you as a young lawyer. To get value, you must isolate your personal objectives for your brand and work towards the fulfilment of such objectives alongside those of your firm.

Many of us are at risk of getting holed up as hermits behind our desks without an idea of the goings-on even at the level of the NBA which is our primary legal network. You need not attend every meeting of the NBA or the International Bar Association (IBA) but visibility in the market as an individual and as a representative of your firm is primary.

As an individual, socialise in non-legal and legal gatherings. This also helps you create potential for future legal work because these relationships where nurtured could yield up transactions for your firm and opportunities to use your legal talent.

Search out opportunities for visibility too but be careful not to let your brand be in competition with your firm. You represent your firm as well and your brand should be a tool that you utilise to derive value for your firm and consequently yourself.

BUILD YOUR TRUST BANK

Trust is a currency. Unlike the dollar or Naira, once it depreciates, there is a very slim chance that it is resuscitated.

Your law firm sells its experience and clients respond/buy by reposing trust in the firm for the delivery of services similar to that which your firm has marketed.

Likewise, you, by your daily actions, tell your colleagues or clients whether or not you are someone in whom trust is to be reposed. Like

with building, the laying of blocks may take significant time but the destruction of the blocks can be done in one fell swoop using a bulldozer.

Too many withdrawals from your trust bank leaves the account depleted and there is nothing with which you can trade. The significance of a well maintained trust bank is best experienced in moments where (due to circumstances of life) you are unable to meet up with the standards expected of you. You will find that almost everyone will be ready to cut you some slack because you earned trust in the first place.

SET YOUR STANDARDS

I will be lying to ignore that in certain cases, some superior lawyers do not treat younger lawyers fairly. This emanates from different experiences which could range from being treated unfairly at the nascent years of their career, lack of organisation and ideals or outright unkindness.

A good law firm must have a culture and ethos that enables young lawyers to find their voice as it is only then that the lawyer would be a viable resource to the firm. As a young lawyer with a strategy for his/her progression, it is important to identify how you want to be treated. You are not a work tool, you are a competent person whose efforts must be fairly treated and acknowledged. Kindly note that my reference to treatment here should not be solely interpreted as monetary compensation, in fact it has less to do with that.

Articulate your expectations clearly and earn respect by delivering your dues. Where there is abuse, highlight it respectfully and be risk inclined enough to make a move out where necessary.

The long term effect of condoning abuse is that the lawyer would in most cases be unable to mature and this will stave off future opportunities that you may have had if you were allowed to enter into and be comfortable in your own skin. The NBA has also created a

platform for filing complaints, if there is extreme abuse, please reach out to the NBA and get the matter attended to.

Each one of the above-listed utensils is in itself enriching. A combination of all of them guarantees excellent reward for young lawyers at the beginning and even when the wig becomes “aged”.

Oyeyemi was recently appointed Second Vice Chairman of the Young Lawyers Forum of the Nigerian Bar Association’s Section on Business Law.