

Opening Statement

HOW TO WOW

NANCY SCOTT DEGAN

The author is a shareholder with Baker Donelson Bearman Caldwell & Berkowitz, PC, New Orleans, and chair of the Section of Litigation.

I recently sat at a conference table in an informal meeting with seven firm colleagues, and I could not help noticing the one person who took command of the room when he spoke. He was not the most influential or most senior attorney there, and he said nothing particularly earth-shattering. Nevertheless, when he spoke, the other lawyers paid attention. He had the “wow” factor. We have all seen lawyers who have that special something, and many of us aspire to be such lawyers. I use this—my final column as chair of the Section of Litigation—to identify characteristics of lawyers who have the wow factor, and I include in this description information I have gathered from in-house counsel on what wows them.

Organization. Lawyers who wow appear to be organized. They come to a meeting with enumerated written descriptions of points or issues they intend to discuss, and they invite you to follow along. Whether they are truly organized does not matter. When they present their points with a handout prepared in advance, they command attention.

Presence. Wow Lawyers speak clearly and slowly, and they have good posture when delivering their message. They smile easily, and they generally make eye contact with those to whom they speak.

Strategy. When discussing a topic, lawyers with the wow factor don’t just lay out the issues; they provide potential courses of action—next steps—to attain a goal. In this manner, they show ownership of the case or situation.

Responsibility. Wow Lawyers may lead a team or be part of a team led by others, but are clear that on their projects, the buck stops with them. They confirm with clients how and by whom a case or matter will be handled and that they have the ultimate responsibility for the outcome. If a mistake is made, they acknowledge it immediately—and suggest corrective actions. They are punctual at meetings and comply with deadlines. In fact, they often complete projects ahead of schedule.

Generosity. Lawyers who wow praise their colleagues and share their successes. They did not become Wow Lawyers on their

own and expressly recognize their team members’ efforts. They also acknowledge the work or other contributions a client may have afforded toward the success.

Communication. Wow Lawyers are concise in their work-related communications with others. They keep their colleagues and clients apprised, and if a topic warrants discussion, they schedule a time for a conference and provide a precise explanation of the purpose of the call or meeting. They don’t waste time with war stories, and they don’t send long emails.

Creativity. Lawyers who wow think outside the box. I once witnessed a Wow Lawyer settle a case by arranging for his client to purchase the property that was alleged to have been damaged. The solution was elegant and unusual, and the client was wowed.

Knowledge. Wow Lawyers take the time to learn about the client’s business, the business of their law firms, and the lives outside the office of those with whom they work. They want to know what challenges and what motivates those with whom they deal, and they use that information to strengthen their relationships. It would not be unusual for a Wow Lawyer to ask a client or colleague to describe her typical day to determine how he can be helpful. And Wow Lawyers know what they don’t know—a critical quality many others lack.

Foresight. A lawyer who anticipates the needs of others—particularly judges, their law clerks, and clients—exhibits wow. One in-house counsel I know requires outside counsel to prepare agendas for the meetings with her internal clients on issues related to cases. A Wow Lawyer does this without being asked.

Attention. Wow Lawyers invest their own time and money on thoughtful touches. They travel to a client’s office at their own expense when they don’t have a case for the client, just to have a cup of coffee or share a meal. They spend one-on-one time with their colleagues *not* talking shop. They ask about families and hobbies, and they follow up on those topics. In short, they don’t take important relationships for granted. ■