

What I Learned In My 1st Year: Working For Uncle Wally

By **Paul Hamburger** (February 21, 2018, 10:49 AM EST)

This article is part of a continuing series featuring attorneys' true-life tales from the earliest days of their legal careers.

Here, Paul Hamburger of Proskauer Rose LLP looks back on his first legal job — working for his attorney uncle while still in law school — and identifies three key things he learned that summer that would turn out to shape the course of his legal practice.



Paul Hamburger

My first summer job as a law student in 1981 was with my uncle Wally. He had a solo practice and some very interesting cases. I had completed one year of law school, and thought I was a pretty good student. At the same time, I had never worked in a law office (or any office, for that matter), and had no understanding of the “real world” into which I would be thrust. I learned a great deal from that experience. Three lessons stand out in particular.

Lesson One: Don't Expect the Partner to Do Your Work for You

Uncle Wally asked me to research some point of law. I left his office to collect my thoughts. When I formulated my questions, I went back in and asked him a question or two.

He looked up from his desk, and in words I will never forget, he gave me his six-word answer: “Do I look like a library?”

He taught me that there are no shortcuts to doing your job. First do what you can, and take the project as far as you can. The partner can help fill in the gaps or add some judgment to the process. But there is no getting around doing the basic legwork first.

Lesson Two: Learn How to Listen

One day, I was sitting in my uncle's office taking notes as he was explaining a project. He stopped talking and said “What are you doing?”



**WHAT I LEARNED IN
MY FIRST YEAR**

"Taking notes," I replied.

He barked out, "Put that pencil down!" Then he continued.

"Look, I have no idea what you are writing on that piece of paper. If you don't understand what I'm saying, your notes will be useless. So just listen to me. Let's have a conversation.

"When you are talking with your mother, do you take notes? If not, how will you possibly remember what she said? The reason you don't take notes is that you are invested in your relationship with your mother. I want you invested in this work relationship in the same way. Let's talk, and if you don't understand something, ask me. But stop focusing on what you are writing and pay attention to what I'm saying."

Thereafter, I started exercising my memory muscles. I learned how to listen before I took notes.

Years later, the CEO of a major corporation told people that I was his favorite lawyer. I practice in employee benefits. Why was I, a benefits attorney, the favorite lawyer of the CEO of a major corporation? He said that I was the only lawyer who did not come in with a notepad and scribble down everything he said.

"Do you know how uncomfortable I am when I'm trying to talk to the lawyer and the lawyer is writing down every word? I shut down and the conversation becomes very limiting." With me he just had a conversation and we talked about whatever he wanted to talk about. I would ask questions and he would give me answers. Of course, when I left the room, I would write down pages of notes; but Uncle Wally's lesson helped me learn how to put clients at ease by just listening to what they had to say.

Lesson Three: Understand What You Are Being Asked to Do

On the first day of my first job in the legal field, Uncle Wally asked me whether, under the Michigan Rules of Civil Procedure, service of process could be made by mail. Being nervous and unsure of everything, I heard the question as, "Could service of process be made by a male (as opposed to a female)?"

I thought it was a silly question; but he was the boss and must have had a reason for inquiring as to whether there was some gender preference associated with process serving. Mine was not to question why (so I thought).

I went to the library and found the pertinent rule in the correct and up-to-date book. It seemed that service of process could be made through almost any means (in person, by mail, by messenger, etc.). However, I could not find any reference at all to a gender-based restriction. So I photocopied the rule and handed it to my uncle, saying, "I don't think there is a problem." He responded "Great. So put it in the mail this afternoon."

At that moment, the light bulb went on inside my head and I realized how ridiculous I seemed (to myself). I kept my mouth shut and mailed the document. I also learned to make sure I fully understood any project and what I was being asked to do before going down the wrong road.

Looking back to that time some 37 years ago, I realize how fortunate I was to have mentors and teachers

along the way to help guide me in my legal career. Having benefited from these great resources, I can appreciate even more how important it is for us, as partners, to continue that tradition.

Proskauer has many different training and mentoring programs. At the basic level, these programs train our lawyers to be skilled at their craft. At a deeper level, these programs provide us with an opportunity to pass on the life lessons from a career — lessons that will enrich our lawyers and provide a lasting impact on them and the profession.

Years after I worked for him, my uncle was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Toward the end, he was restricted to his bed and I called him just to talk. During the call, I told him I had to confess to something that I never told him before. I recounted the process service story, and we had a good long laugh about how much a young lawyer appreciated his valuable lessons. That's my last memory of Uncle Wally.

Paul M. Hamburger is a partner at Proskauer Rose LLP, co-chair of the firm's employee benefits & executive compensation group and head of its Washington, D.C., office. He is also a leader of the practice center's health and welfare subgroup and a member of Proskauer's health care reform task force.

The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the firm, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.