

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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Minding the Details While Learning to Lead Amid a Pandemic



Serving as president of the New Jersey State Bar Association is the pinnacle of my legal career to date.

I am honored to work on behalf of our members—my colleagues—as we live through one of the most challenging chapters in modern history. And I am constantly impressed by what we have achieved working together for the past several months. We are pulling together, mobilizing our resources quickly and effectively to respond to the ever-changing way the legal system is operating.

I want all our members to know that we are getting it done for you.

From meetings with the Judiciary about the roll-out of virtual and hybrid trials; to conferring with the leaders of bar associations in our neighboring states to discuss how to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic for our members; to conducting meetings of the NJSBA's governing body, its Board of Trustees; to testifying on behalf of the need for more protections to keep our judges safe; to taking part in meetings of our section, committees and Young Lawyers Division; to engaging in difficult conversations with our Commission on Racial Equity in the Law about concrete measure we can take to improve the practice of law.

One thing that has been unique about all of this work is that not a single one of those interactions has been in person. To be honest, this is not what I was expecting when I thought about what my tenure might look like. I love spending time with people, meeting new friends, travelling around to hear what is happening in the practice in all corners of our state. But that's not the world we live in right now.

We are all struggling with our new reality and I want to share few lessons I have learned from six months of leading the state's largest lawyers' group, raising my daughters and attending to my clients, in the hopes they help you be a more effective advocate and leader.

Have a team

For me, leading a meeting means listening to what is being spoken, studying how people are reacting and responding to questions, concerns or feedback. That is uniquely difficult in our Zoom-centric world. What helps is to have a team to help be your eyes and ears. For instance, when I led the Mid-Atlantic Bar Conference this fall, which brought together leaders from bar associations in neighboring states to discuss issues of mutual concern, I tapped a colleague to help me monitor comments posted in chat, to look at people's facial reactions to the conversation and ensure that everyone's questions were addressed. I am fortunate and pleased to share that my colleagues on the Executive Committee have come together as a team with the single purpose of helping our members and the entire legal community. Asking for their help allows me the time to listen closely to the discussion playing out in front of me.

Use multiple devices

If I were leading a meeting in person, I would have an agenda in front of me and could see out to the room full of people. It is hard to split a screen on a computer to see both the gallery of attendees and a speaker. Everything would be minute. Instead, I often use multiple devices to keep track of everything. For instance, I might stream prepared remarks on an iPad while giving a speech using my computer camera. I keep my phone near my computer to field text messages or other updates from attendees and my teammates. I have even commandeered tablets and phones from other family members, at times, if I think it will improve a presentation.

When you make a mistake, acknowledge it and apologize as soon as possible

True story: In a recent Board of Trustees meeting, I mistakenly called someone by another person's name. It was an embarrassing, but honest mistake. I corrected myself as soon as I realized what happened and moved on. It helps build trust and

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integrity among your peers when you own up to a mistake. One lesson I think is important is to apologize, but not make it about myself. I never want the person who I misidentified felt like they needed to make me feel better and say something like 'It's okay.' Say you are sorry with sincerity and move on.

Learn how to speak to the camera

I am a people-person. I love to connect at events, sit down and share a cup of coffee with someone, or just catch up in a hallway. One of the hardest things about serving as president during this pandemic is that I can't do that to learn more about what is on the minds of our members and the legal community. When I step up to the computer as a leader, an important lesson I have learned is to make eye contact with the attendees. That means looking at the camera on my computer, rather than the array of people on the screen – or myself. It is hard to do that because it is natural to want to look at the people you are addressing, but I have to remind myself to look at the camera so I can make that eye contact I crave from interactions with the people in attendance. It takes a lot of practice and I have found it helpful to turn off the "self-view" in meetings, so I don't get distracted.

Set the stage

In the days before the Annual Meeting this spring, we set up a corner of my living room with a podium, flags and a NJSBA step-and-repeat backdrop. It was the perfect frame for my swearing-in and has since been a lifesaver for leading meetings and speaking at seminars and events. When I step to that podium, my brain and body know they are entering a different place and it allows me to focus more clearly on the task at hand. Now, a full-blown set-up isn't feasible

for everyone, but we can all set aside an area to conduct our business, even if it is a tiny corner of the living room. And remember, no one can see any of the chaos that is outside the camera's lens.

Take a break

We are all tech'ed out. This pandemic has us all on our computers, our phones and every other device you can think of 24/7. The flow of work and life has no ending points anymore. Sometimes, you have to give yourself a break. I recently took a few days to be with my family and made an effort to not check my devices regularly to give my brain time to reset. I am still fighting my way through my email backlog, but I submit that it was more than worth it because I came back to work with fresh eyes and more patience.

Lean into the advantages of virtual opportunities

There are so many challenges about our virtual world and it often yields less-than-perfect results. But in some ways, being virtual is a blessing. My predecessors would often have to choose between important legal community events to attend because they were being held at opposite ends of the state at the same time. I don't have to make those difficult decisions. I can say yes to almost everything. Just a few weeks ago I was able to deliver an update about what the NJSBA was doing for the Passaic County Bar Association and extend congratulations at the NJSBA Pro Bono Awards reception. I would have not been able to do both of those events in years past. Not having to choose between events and spend long hours on the highway means I can spend more time doing the actual work of the Association.

Be mindful of nuance

Electronic communications and virtual presentations don't provide a lot of

grace notes. It can be tempting to fire off a terse email or post an angry social media post in a moment of frustration. Don't do it. Actions speak louder than words. In virtual meetings, exaggerate body language to show your agreement with a speaker, speak clearly since virtual formats don't have ideal sound quality, and pick up the phone for follow-ups to have a deeper exchange on a tough topic.

The central mission of the NJSBA is to support our members' professional lives. We are all learning as we go during this pandemic and I hope my experiences can help you in your daily advocacy. ☺

PERKS

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NEW JERSEY STATE BAR
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