



The Complete Lawyer

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT



Stephanie West Allen practiced law in the San Francisco Bay Area where she held several offices in the local bar association, wrote for the California Continuing Education of the Bar, and founded a child advocacy project. While in New Mexico, she created a stress reduction program for lawyers and mediated multi-party disputes.

For several years, Stephanie was manager of professional development for a large Denver law firm. She has taught at the University of Colorado-Denver, Regis University, and Hastings College of the Law. She has written for such publications as *National Law Journal*, *Lawyer Hiring and Training Report*, *Of Counsel*, and *ABA Law Practice*. Stephanie consults with lawyers around the country, and she has created a mediation model based on neuroscience.

Contact: [Stephanie](#) or visit her [blog](#).



Dr. Jeffrey M. Schwartz is a research psychiatrist at the School of Medicine at the University of California at Los Angeles and one of the world's leading experts in neuroplasticity. Decades ago he began to study the philosophy of conscious awareness, the idea that the actions of the mind have an effect on the workings of the brain.

Jeff's breakthrough work in obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) provided the hard evidence that the mind can control the brain's chemistry. He has lectured extensively to both professional and lay audiences in the US, Europe, and Asia. Jeff's books include *The Mind and the Brain* and the bestseller *Brain Lock*, the seminal book on OCD. He is the co-organizer of the upcoming international conference on neuroleadership. Contact: [Jeff Schwartz](#)

Law Students: Create A Well-rounded Life

To foster a full, well-rounded life, it's just as important to exercise your non-lawyer synapses as the ones you etched in law school

By Stephanie West Allen and Jeffrey M. Schwartz

Warning: reading this article will change your brain. But so will your next phone call, your next drive home, your next worry or wish.

Not so long ago, scientists believed that by the time people were young adults, their brains were fixed, static, hard-wired. Now we know that quite the opposite is true. Every experience shifts, shapes and sculpts the brain. The synapses (connections) between the neurons (brain cells) realign as we go about our daily life.

If we decide to take control of our thinking, we have choices about that realignment.

If we are passive or indifferent to our thoughts, life steps into the void and molds our brain outside our awareness.

Taking control is similar to riding a horse. We can take the reins if we wish and the method is simple. Simple but not easy. Our brain can be wild and unruly. For those who choose to take the reins, any ride can be focused and clear-headed, any race can be well-run -- including law school and the practice of law.

The Hurdles We Undergo As Lawyers-In-Training Influence The Lawyer We Will Become

Becoming a lawyer involves passing through several milestones; each reshapes the brain. First comes the bachelor's degree that will provide context and depth to those years in law school. Law school is not a trade school and it requires a complex brain. Education literally creates a brain with more connections; the more education, the more circuitry in the brain. The bachelor's degree can result in a brain fertile for the seeds of law.

The LSAT measures the kinds of connections your brain can make. Does a person now have the skills and aptitudes necessary to earn a score high enough to gain admission to law school? While you are taking the LSAT, your synapses, those brain chains, are being measured and tested. Preparing for and taking the test reinforces some tracks.

After law school comes the Bar Exam. The typical intensity of study for the Bar also leaves its mark on the brain. Connections are forged and the lawyer's brain becomes even more different from that of a person who has not had the unique law school experience. With each rite of passage, the etchings of attorney thinking are laid down on the brain.

Of course, the strongest influence in becoming a new lawyer, the most powerful process of neuro-engraving, is law school.

During law school, students learn to think like lawyers; their brains become lawyer brains. Each law student can become a masterful lawyer or a rote lawyer. From the outside each lawyer can appear to be practicing the same--until the best performance is required. Then the masterful lawyer excels and the others get by.

That mastery can come from what we explain below and is best learned while you are still in law school.

Each student has a choice between acquiescing to the brain changes caused by law school or co-authoring the alterations. How can a law student learn to control his or her brain to achieve the above-mentioned mastery and ensure that the law school experience is optimal?

Here are some tips.

Pay Attention To What Your Brain Is Doing

Attention is such a critical capability of human beings that philosophers have reminded us that we *are* our attention. What I pay attention to is who I am. If I pay attention to the stress and the strain of law school, I will be creating a mind that gives birth to a stressed and strained person. If I pay attention to my advancement and growth in legal expertise, and to the goal of being a lawyer, I can become a satisfied lawyer.

Paying attention is not easy and most people don't do it very often. In order to pay attention, a person has to have thoughts instead of the thoughts having him or her.

As most of us drift through each day, our thoughts are automatic and impulsive.

Paying attention is a learned skill, one that takes practice. It requires a necessary ability to step back mentally and observe what your mind is doing, to observe as an "impartial spectator"¹ your thoughts and feelings and preferences and moods.

Let us say you plan to go to the law library to study for the evening. Instead you find yourself sitting down to watch a movie on television. Now would be a good time to bring in your impartial spectator. Shift into the observer role and watch your thoughts and preferences. As if you were talking about yourself as a third person, describe what is being played out in your mind. That spectator doing the observing and describing is your attention. Only that spectator can make true and conscious decisions. Let it make your evening plans.

It is in your best interest professionally and personally to ensure that your impartial spectator is the one attending law school. You, your clients, and your profession will be served. It brings self-awareness, and a self-aware lawyer commands respect, gains recognition, and reassures clients. It knows how to lead.

Your impartial spectator allows you to become aware of yourself in a new way, and this is an important trait of leadership. According to an article in the February, 2007, edition of *Harvard Business Review*:

"When 75 members of Stanford Graduate School of Business' Advisory Council were asked to recommend the most important capability for leaders to develop, their answer was nearly unanimous: self-awareness."²

We sense self-awareness when we see it in a person--*and* that person we will follow, if for no other reason than to learn his or her secret.

Lawyers are powerful people in our society; they are the facilitators and guardians of justice. The more the members of the profession are operating from the strength of

the impartial spectator, the better justice is served. Law school presents a wonderful laboratory in which to learn and practice the impartial spectator so it becomes automatic, so it becomes the ultimate habit.

Create Good Habits

That seems cliché and hackneyed advice. If we look at it from the perspective of attention and the brain, the advice takes on a fresh, new meaning. You may use your newfound capacities to pay attention and be self-aware to create good habits. As these habits become second-nature, they will sculpt your brain and design your future.

Suppose you want to create a habit of exercising so your body is more fit to handle your law school challenges. You plan to start riding your bike this afternoon.

Afternoon arrives and you really want to go have a beer with friends as you have on so many past afternoons. Meeting your friends is truly calling to you because your brain over time has developed going-out-for-a-beer-in-the-afternoon connections, and they are actual physiological synapses. You have no going-for-a-bike-ride synapses - yet.

But if you are paying attention, your impartial spectator can rescue you by reminding you that you have choices. In that moment of choice is your power. If you choose the bike today, it will be easier to make that choice tomorrow, and easier the day after that. With each stroke of the pedal, you will be creating biking-in-the-afternoon connections in your brain, which will get stronger each day. Using attention and awareness, you have created a good habit.

Charles Reader said, "Sow a thought; reap an action. Sow an act; reap a habit. Sow a habit; reap a character. Sow a character; reap a destiny." The original thought that you sow is your attention. Those habits you choose to create, the way you build your brain, is a key to your future. Use those years in law school to create good habits.

You can be a conscious, thoughtful, mindful brain architect.

Learn To Be Cross-Cultural

Culture has been likened to a tank of water in which a fish swims. The fish is aware of nothing else so its whole universe is the water. If we do not become aware of the culture in which we are fully immersed and of the force it exerts on us, we are as contained and ignorant as that fish

Each educational course, each profession, molds the brain just as does the culture in which we live. In law school you enter a new culture. In this global society, it is advantageous to learn to step back and observe your country's culture so you can smoothly function across cultures. And it is important to learn to step back and

observe your profession's practices, language and ways of thinking. Otherwise you will not be multi-cultural as you cross back and forth over the boundaries between your law practice and the rest of your life. Applying the lawyer culture's methods in the home culture may not always be conducive to familial harmony.

In his article "[The Jargon Jumble: Kids Have 'Skeds,' Colleagues, 'Needs'](#)" (from *The Wall Street Journal Online*), Jared Sandberg tells the story of a lawyer and his son; this lawyer used a tactic perhaps better left in the courtroom.

"A few weeks ago, John Scott found his 8-year-old walking down the hall with a glass of chocolate milk--contraband outside of the kitchen. His son said it was for his older brother. Suspicious of the sudden magnanimity, Mr. Scott, a litigator, began to cross-examine him: 'You've never taken chocolate milk out of the kitchen to give to your brother, have you?' he asked. Mr. Scott's wife gave him a look that said clearly, 'Quit being a pompous legal blowhard around your children.'"

Most lawyers probably are not that unaware of the lawyer culture software in their brain, but the question asked by James Boyd White in his book *The Legal Imagination* may have wider application.

Discussing the lawyer's distinct use and experience of language, White asks if the "peculiarities we observe" are due to the "existence of a discrete professional language with its own vocabulary and syntax" or to "Habits of mind and ways of working that find expression in whatever verbal language the lawyer uses, even when he is talking, say, to his client or to a jury in ordinary English."

White then asks: "What relationship can the lawyer establish with these patterns of thought and language that he uses? Can he simply learn to use and master them without being somehow affected--perhaps controlled--by what he has learned? . . . What is the relationship between the lawyer's language and his mind?"

Yes, the lawyer is affected, perhaps controlled, if not engaging the impartial spectator. Given what we know about the brain today, the choices a lawyer makes about what is said and left unsaid, the language and syntax a lawyer uses, and the lawyer's "habits of mind" all change the lawyer's brain. Thinking like a lawyer physically and significantly changes your brain.

The time to take care that you remain cross-cultural is when you are entering the legal culture. Pay attention to the changes that are happening. Maintain the knowledge, language, and sensitivity of the cultures of which you want to remain a participating citizen. Don't forget how people who are not lawyers speak and see the world. A multi-cultural lawyer can cross boundaries easily; he or she can understand and be understood by many--family, friends and clients included. Your impartial spectator will foster your cross-culturalism.

Cherish Your Ignorance

When you entered law school, you probably had never heard of such concepts as duty, breach, causation, damage, offer, acceptance and consideration. Remember that ignorance and hold on to the days before you knew what you know now. That ignorance is a key to communication with non-lawyers.

In their book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Stick and Others Die*, Chip and Dan Heath describe the Curse of Knowledge.

"Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like to not to know it. Our knowledge has 'cursed' us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can't readily re-create our listeners' state of mind."

An old sales adage advises salespeople to speak about benefits, not features--to talk about what the other person gains, not about what we know. One easy way to spot a beginning salesperson is to listen to him or her talk all about the features of the service or product being sold and to strut his or her knowledge.

If we had peppered this article with technical descriptions of brain processes and brain anatomy, we would have been feature-focused. We chose to give you the information we hope will be helpful. We hope we have been benefit-focused. Although we are not selling you anything, we would like to persuade you of the benefits to you of what we write. We *are* salespeople of ideas; most of us are.

The Curse of Knowledge can complicate the focus on the other person. This lack of focus on the other person's needs and point of view, this feature focus, obviously can be a problem with family and friends. It also can have an extremely detrimental effect on relationships with clients, prospective clients, opposing counsel, staff, and the list goes on.

Remember what it was like before you had all that information about the law. To use a phrase from Zen, remember your "beginner's mind." As the lawyer synapses get established in your brain, don't neglect the synapses of the beginner's mind or you will lose them. Brain synapses not used are pruned and they wither. Exercise your beginner's-mind pathways every so often. Listen to non-lawyers and recall how you used to see things. Then you will be not only multi-cultural but also multi-lingual--traits that foster a full and well-rounded life. Someone stuck exclusively in the lawyer culture and lawyer knowledge can be very lonely.

Now you have four tips for your law school toolkit. Strong and focused attention wielded by the observing, impartial spectator is the key to all four of these tips. That attention is the overarching tool for a sane and successful law school experience. Once

you have that tool, you can choose to customize your lawyer brain and design your law school experience.

NOTES

1. Phrase was first used by Adam Smith, 18th century philosopher and economist, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.
2. Bill George, Peter Sims, Andrew N. McLean, Diana Mayer, "Discovering Your Authentic Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, February 2007: 129-138.