

## Lessons I learned to be more effective as a woman lawyer

By Mian R. Wang

I am an introvert and a perfectionist. I am also a woman and a litigator. I think I am



not alone in wearing all these hats.

As a young attorney, I spent a lot of time keeping my thoughts and ideas to myself be-

cause I did not want to be wrong or come across as unknowledgeable. But I always regretted not speaking up sooner after I heard the same ideas or thoughts being raised by someone else.

I also spent a lot of time feeling anxious every time I walked into the courtroom, presented at a CLE, or explained my analysis to a supervising attorney. But after watching others present inside and outside of the courtroom, I realized that there are many styles of speaking and no one always has an answer to every question.

Over the next few years, I developed an interest in learning about techniques that helped channel both my reluctance to speak up and my anxiety over being wrong into productive skills.

As I looked for resources to help me, I found that my professional development obstacles are common to many women. I have tried a number of methods over the years as I have become more senior and moved into more leadership roles. Some work better than others.

It has not been an easy journey; I constantly have to push myself outside of my comfort zone, but the reward of showing myself what I can do is gratifying.

For those introverts/perfectionists who need a roadmap for their journey, here are five lessons I learned:

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### 1. Implement a solution-focused process to overcome the fear of being wrong.

As a young attorney, it was not uncommon for me to lie awake at night worrying about whether I missed an important case or left out a relevant fact in a brief or a research memorandum I submitted that day. Worrying about something that I no longer controlled was ineffective and debilitating.

However, I learned that fear can also be an effective tool to help me make better decisions and be more prepared. Most of the time, my fear originates from a place of uncertainty: uncertain about the problem, uncertain about what could be a solution, and uncertain about how I would get to a solution.

Instead of dwelling on the uncertainty, which fuels fear, I direct my fear into identifying (1) what the problem is; (2) what a possible solution looks like; (3) what incremental steps I need to take to bridge the problem and solution; and (4) what resources I can use to help me make that bridge.

Not all four parts can be answered all the time, and not all situations can be divided into four discrete parts. However, I find that focusing on establishing a process to identify and address my uncertainty helps me overcome the fear of being wrong.

### 2. Anticipate and manage feelings of anxiety.

Closely related to fear is anxiety. For me, the physical signs of anxiety are the pounding of my heart, the heat in my cheeks, and the tension in my body. In those moments, instead of focusing on the CLE presentation I am about to give, the deposition I am about to take, or the oral argument I am about to do, all I can think of is my physical reaction.

To my surprise, I found being well-prepared did not seem to alleviate my anxiety much.

Then my mental framework shifted when

I learned to reframe my anxiety as excitement. See A. Wood Brooks, "Get Excited: Reappraising Pre-Performance Anxiety as Excitement," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2014).

By reframing the pounding of my heart, the heat in my cheeks, and the tension in my body as signs of excitement, it allows me to adopt an opportunity mind-set instead of a threat mind-set. Instead of dreading my upcoming performance, I begin to look forward to it.

While I have not measured whether my performance improved with this shifted mindset, I have found that just believing that I am experiencing excitement helps me re-focus on the upcoming performance.

### 3. Maximize your impact.

I used to be single-mindedly focused on achieving perfectionism, which, for me, meant I trusted only myself to handle every task on my to-do list. Not only did that lead me to spend time on marginally productive activities, it was also highly inefficient.

As I became more senior and gained more responsibilities, both at work and at home, it was no longer possible to do everything soup-to-nuts. The pursuit of perfectionism is time-consuming and carries with it an opportunity cost. I can also lose sight of the bigger picture.

What I needed was to recognize where I can maximize my impact and where I can delegate. See R. Knight, "How to Manage Your Perfectionism," *Harvard Business Review* (2019).

Not every task requires, or warrants, perfection. What I learned is to adjust my standards with respect to the tasks and to delegate when appropriate. Delegation is not only important for my own professional development, it is important to the growth of my junior colleagues.

While it is important to be clear in communicating the delegated task, it is also important, when appropriate, to leave room for others to contribute their views. I find that

it leads to more engagement, more diverse views, and better outcomes.

### 4. Decision-making is not binary.

As a young attorney, I used to agonize over making decisions. I felt I needed time to find the "correct" decision.

But as I worked with more people, especially people who think differently than I do, I learned that decision-making is not binary. Most of the time, it is not "either this or that."

Rather than viewing decision-making as a one-time process with a singular outcome, I can be more flexible by coming up with more than two possible options. See D. Stuart and T. Nordstrom, "The One-Three-Five Rule to Ending Decision Paralysis," *Desert News* (2015).

The exercise of thinking through multiple options will facilitate viewing the problem from different angles and lead to better decision-making.

### 5. Be confident.

At the beginning of my legal career, I tended to qualify my views with phrases like "I could be wrong but" or "I think" or "I'm sorry but." I used those qualifiers because I was afraid of being wrong or leaving a bad impression.

Then I observed others making statements that I knew were incorrect, but I doubted my own knowledge because those statements were made with authority and strength of conviction.

I made a conscious decision to be more intentional with my speech patterns. Where possible, I eliminated unnecessary qualifiers and avoided using apologies as an automatic reaction to someone challenging my view. Over time, I found that when I eliminated the qualifiers, I sounded more confident, and as I sounded more confident, I became more confident.

I am the best advocate for my ideas and positions, and I would be doing them a disservice by undercutting them with qualifiers and apologies. **MLW**