



INSIGHT

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My number one tip for surviving M&A as a lawyer

Hint: It is not to impress your client at all costs

The most memorable moment of my career thus far happened in 2016, when I was a candidate attorney in the competition department at Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr. I had started my competition rotation the week prior and, on this particular day, I accompanied my director to an in-person meeting with a blue chip client. When we arrived, we were escorted by a receptionist into a rather tiny elevator and went up to a second floor boardroom where the meeting took place. The meeting lasted about an hour and, as we wrapped up, the client offered to escort us back downstairs. The three of us got into the aforementioned tiny elevator and down we went. As the elevator came to a stop on the ground floor, the client (a serious woman who demonstrated steadfast professionalism throughout the meeting) began to say her goodbyes and as she did so, she seemed to sort of lean in towards me. Without thinking, I hugged her. She immediately let out a startled, "Oh!". This did not deter me. I held on tighter as her body stood still as a salt pillar, notably not reciprocating the hug. When I finally let go, she gathered herself and leaned towards me again, only this time I realised what her real intention was all along – she was reaching for the button to hold open the elevator door. I have truly never been so mortified in my entire life. Non-consensual hugging of a client was not on the list of career milestones I wanted to achieve before the age of 30. To this day, when I think back on this moment, my face goes a deep shade of magenta.

The thing is, this unfortunate event is not even the "most memorable" part of that day. Later, I joined some fellow candidate attorneys for lunch back at the office. We were a tight-knit group of young women, bonded for life by our shared time 'in the trenches' at a large corporate law firm. Obviously, I relayed the story of how I had hugged an important client by accident. We spent that entire lunch laughing hysterically at my faux pas. With tears streaming down our faces, we concluded that I would surely do very well in

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my performance evaluation in the "client satisfaction" category. The zingers kept coming, and I left that lunch feeling as light as a balloon – completely and utterly content. Laughter, as they say, really is the best medicine.

That, coupled with connection, is in my view how you survive M&A as a lawyer. I cannot count the number of bad days that were turned good by having a laugh with my colleagues. There was the tale of a colleague who, when commissioning a document for the first time for a client, had high-fived the client when the client raised his hand to take the commissioner's oath. There was the tale of my

first deal closing when, having been asked to print a document at the speed of light, I practically tackled another associate away from the printer. Later, I apologised to him and explained the blood curdling urgency of the matter, only for him to bemusedly say "No worries, I was only printing recipes" (which, of course, inspired absolute mirth amongst everyone else at the office). Who could forget when another one of our group had been instructed for the first time to "uplift a court file" and did so by, well, bringing the original file back to the office in all its glory, much to the astonishment of her director.

It is these moments, as much as anything else, that shaped me as a lawyer and as a person. M&A law is not easy. We work long hours. We agonise over minutiae because, in this game, the minutiae matters. We have to think deeply, respond quickly, and be ready for the curve balls that fly at us daily like bludgers in a Quidditch game. For me, personally, this is not doable without a very healthy sense of humour and the support and encouragement of like-minded people around you who are going through the same thing.

Ten years after that fateful hugging incident, I am still in touch with the group of women who helped me process it (and many other work-related dramas) through laughter and shared understanding. We are in a book club together (a virtual one, as we are now spread across the globe) and, most of the time, we spend more time laughing about our legal 'war stories' than talking about the books. I would not have it any other way. 