

TRIAL

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Law office management

The Sheff story Partnership built on trust

Douglas Sheff

I grew up under "loving cross-examination," the value of which eluded me until I began working with my father. For me, it was normal to get home late after a ball game or a concert and have Dad begin the conversation with "Isn't it fair to say ..."

I went to law school thinking I was not

going to become a trial lawyer, simply because Dad was one. I went into the district attorney's office straight from school, thinking I would carve out a niche in criminal law, not civil law, where Dad focused his practice.

As my career evolved, I worked for a short time in a personal injury firm, but outside my native New England. Only after I had fully matured as a young lawyer and as a person was I ready to work with my dad, Irving "Chick" Sheff.

Perhaps this would never have happened if he were not so wise. He never pushed me to work with him. He always allowed me choice, autonomy, and respect. I'll always be grateful for that and recommend a similar approach to any parent of an aspiring lawyer.

Naturally, there have been drawbacks. The first year with Dad was extremely frustrating. Not only was he extra tough on his youngest associate, but other lawyers in the firm were reluctant to offer their full respect. They wanted to see a contribution, a successful track record in court.

As time passed, these problems gradually subsided, and, thankfully, Dad let me try cases my way. But we fought for countless hours (and sometimes still do) over firm administration and choice of cases. As discovery rules began to demand an immense amount of time and resources for even a single case and the practice became more technologically advanced, disagreement between us was unavoidable.

I rejected many cases he would have accepted. I accepted some cases he thought too risky and complex. Today, however, we almost always agree on case selection. The fact that a file now often contains 10 times as many documents as a similar case file from the past gave credence to my arguments to tailor our case load.

There is nothing more valuable than trust between law partners. Dad and I have had that from day one. There's a natural



Irving "Chick" Sheff and his son, Douglas, say trust is the foundation on which they built their practice.

motivation to excel when your dad is watching. Victories are twice as sweet. And because we support each other, the inevitable disappointments are forgotten twice as fast.

Through it all there's this little voice to guide me, with both wisdom and humor. It appears when things get tough, whether Dad's there or not, and I know that it will always be there, giving me his unique perspective on the law and life.

Unconditional trust has benefited Dad as well. It is gratifying to watch him relax a bit, travel, and reap some of the fruits of his decades of toil. He's able to do this while constantly making valuable contributions to the firm's ongoing work. It's "fair to say" that things have worked out great.

Last year, when ATL's annual convention was held in Boston, we threw a terrific party in honor of Chick. For me, it was a rare moment when a son could express his love and appreciation of his father—as a lawyer, a partner, and a friend. □

Douglas Sheff is a principal in the Sheff Law Offices in Boston.

Reaping rewards

Irving H. Sheff

My son started practicing with my firm 13 years ago. I extended to him no privileges not given to all other attorneys in our firm. In fact, because Doug is my son, considerable pressures were put on him.

Like any active trial firm, we had accumulated a backlog of cases over the years. I took these cases, affectionately referred to as my "junk," and assigned them to my son. These were cases with difficult liability that other attorneys in the firm had been avoiding. They put the cases aside, sought continuances constantly, and did everything they could to prevent going to trial.

Of course, when I assigned these matters to Doug, I didn't tell him about the difficulties confronting him. To my amazement, he won most of the cases.

Certain pressures exist in most father-son relationships, one being the notion that the son cannot succeed without the father. Doug felt this and other pressures in these early times, including the need to prove

himself to his boss—his dad. Fortunately, our relationship nurtured our confidence in each other and our mutual respect and loyalty to the firm.

Doug was always the first one to tell me what he thought I was doing wrong. We would argue and eventually resolve these differences. For example, I sometimes represented old friends in legal matters. Often I would not get paid, but I still represented them. Doug sometimes thought my time was improperly spent working on these cases and couldn't understand when I insisted on doing it anyway. Eventually he came to understand that old friends had to be helped, even if it was not financially wise.

Doug learned everything I had to teach him, and then expanded on that. Before long, he was one of the leaders of our trial team. Other attorneys with greater longevity looked to him for suggestions.

Trying cases is one thing; running a business is another. Doug wanted to learn everything he could, not only about litigation, but also about organizing and managing the office. He has improved the way we keep books; hire and fire; do payroll and banking; and handle employee relations, purchasing, and taxes. His self-motivation made it easier for me to turn over the reins of the business to him.

Now that I have reduced the hours I spend at work, Doug is not reluctant to take over. We respect and trust each other. As a result, my life has become much easier. I have someone in the firm who is completely in charge, someone whom I trust and who adds immeasurably to our organization. The transition came gradually and is now complete. I am very fortunate.

My son is not a saint. Far from it. He is tough, unwavering, always right, opinionated, and obstinate. People say he's the spitting image of me.

That age-old adage must have something to it (I've heard it often enough): The apple does not fall far from the tree. □

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