

Sharks, Minnows, and Strong Fish In Between: What I learned in the Colorado Bar Association Leadership Training

By Mallory Revel

Lawyers are supposed to be sharks – ferocious predators circling the legal waters of the courtroom, looking for their next unsuspecting meal. This is what popular TV shows tell us. When we see lawyers depicted in films, they are often yelling, pounding on podiums, and destroying everyone in their path to satisfy their competitive appetites. In the real world, we expect lawyers to be leaders in the community. I've always liked the *idea* of leadership. That is one of the reasons why I was so eager to join FGMC – I saw so much leadership from the attorneys in this firm and wanted to be a part of it. But, I still had questions. Does a lawyer need to be a shark to be a leader? If you are not a shark, does that make you a minnow? Will you get eaten? Is there a happy medium in the sea?

These are a few questions the Colorado Bar Association Leadership Training (COBALT) program answered for me. COBALT is a six-month training program that brings together recognized leaders in the legal community who share a common goal of enhancing their leadership skills. Twenty lawyers with various backgrounds and practice areas are selected from a pool of many applicants from across the state. All the themed sessions are challenging and rewarding, and approach leadership from several unique angles. Finding yourself in a room with more talent than you can fathom is both daunting and incredibly energizing. I would like to share a few of my favorite things I learned from my journey in COBALT.

1) **Leadership can't be learned.** This truth is discouraging when you enter a program to learn to be a leader. But, being an authentic leader is about tapping into your existing qualities and honing the tools you have acquired from your experiences. You cannot teach a minnow to be a shark, and vice versa. Nor should you try. Leaders can be sharks, minnows, or any number of sensible, strong fish in between. I like to think I am a non-aggressive shark. I will not be pushed around and have plenty of fight in me, but certainly do not put my opponents down for the sake of dominance. I do not devour what is in my path. I strive to incorporate kindness and civility with strength. What matters about leadership is that it is authentic. Whatever you are, you can be a leader.

2) **Leadership is inclusive.** We associate lawyers with type-A personalities. On our first weekend in COBALT, our class did some intensive personality testing. I was not surprised to be told I scored highly on both assertiveness and expressiveness. What I was surprised by was how unaware I was of how my expressiveness could affect others. There are brilliant, bold leaders that do not readily express their exceptional ideas for a variety of reasons. It bodes outspoken lawyers well to stop and listen. Notice the leaders in the room that may not be talking. Invite them to speak. You will likely hear

something very useful. And don't worry, you won't lose your seat at the table by inviting someone else to sit down.

3) **Clients look to their lawyers for leadership.** When I used to think about leadership, it was in the context of the community, a firm, a family, or even politics. I was thrilled to discover that everything lawyers learn about leadership in COBALT can be applied to their practice. Through COBALT, I realized that when clients look to lawyers to lead them through stressful, uncertain times, this is an opportunity for leadership. Clients constantly look to their lawyers for guidance, advice, and empathy. We learned that to be an effective leader, people must first want to follow you. Clients hire us to follow us. Step one is complete! Next, we must strive to be leaders worthy of our clients' trust and confidence.

4) **Speaking of empathy, it is really important.** I've always optimistically considered myself an empathetic person. However, being aware of how someone is feeling falls short of showing empathy. Lawyers can imagine how their clients may feel all day long. However, this awareness does very little for the client. What helps clients is to hear that their lawyer feels for them. I learned the vast importance of saying a few simple words that speak volumes, when those words are sincerely empathetic. Incorporating more empathy in my practice is the most priceless thing I learned in COBALT.

5) **You can't be trusted if you aren't being vulnerable.** David Beller, a lawyer I admire endlessly, told my COBALT class this and I will never forget it. I have always been a big proponent of preserving professionalism in law. In COBALT, I learned the importance of preserving some personality in the practice of law. Of course, clients want their lawyer to be knowledgeable, polite, and professional. They expect their lawyer to be lawyerly. COBALT taught me that clients also want their lawyer to be a person. I realize this may seem rudimentary, but this serves to circle back to the truth that you cannot be trusted if you are not being vulnerable. Clients often come to us in their darkest hour. They need to trust us to guide them and help them. They also want a person standing next to them in court. A person with a family and hobbies and who goes on vacation (and keeps in touch, obviously!) As the old adage goes, sharing is caring. I am not delusional, and I do not think my clients want to see my childhood coin collection (although, they are missing out). But, they do want to see me as a person, and I owe them that. COBALT taught me how to be personable and professional at the same time.

As it turns out, lawyers are not divided into sharks and minnows. There are many varieties of strong fish in between, and I'm very grateful to work with so many strong fish at FGMC. I am also thankful to be a member of the 2018 COBALT class. As eager as I was to learn about leadership, I was not expecting to meet twenty classmates who inspire me and challenge me to no end. Thank you to the program, to my classmates, to FGMC for supporting my development. If any of this resonated with you, please consider applying for COBALT. It will revolutionize your practice, change your life, and I promise you will make a friend or two (or twenty!) along the way. I am also honored to

continue this journey by serving on the 2019 COBALT Sessions Committee. I look forward to helping the next class discover their authentic leadership styles through all the epiphanies they can handle. Cheers COBALT 2019!