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The magic of professional gravitas

Since I started this column nearly three years ago, I have discussed a variety of topics which address the evolution of the legal profession and the disruptive forces profoundly changing the way in which we practice law.

Together, we have explored ways in which we can weather this permanent instability by bettering ourselves as professionals and as people and by developing and harnessing those qualities and characteristics which help make us uniquely valuable to our clients and in the marketplace.

I recently examined the likability factor and how it affects our ability to understand and relate to others. While it is an important component of the overall package we offer clients, it is only one of any number of skills which are critically important in our ability to meaningfully distinguish ourselves from the competition.

A close cousin to likability is gravitas. It is often used interchangeably with words such as charisma and executive presence. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as "dignity, seriousness or solemnity of manner" and, according to the Urban Dictionary, it is "strength of character, self-esteem, confidence." Wikipedia mentions that it is one of the Roman virtues, along with pietas, dignitas and virtus and that it "conveys a certain substance or depth of personality."

Notwithstanding the fact that it is defined in any number of ways, gravitas still remains a bit of a conundrum. Historically, the term has mainly been used in the political realm, but, as it has become an increasingly mainstream concept, it is often applied in other contexts, including in the media and

business worlds.

As with other things which defy a clear-cut explanation, you know it when you see it. People with gravitas exude success, an air of authority and leadership and command respect. They are effective communicators and they garner credibility and convey a wisdom often attributable to both age and experience.

They have a level of confidence which is readily perceived by others, yet without projecting a sense of arrogance. Those with gravitas are authentic and align what they say with how they think and what they do, which makes their communications with others much more powerful and impactful. They project selflessness as their way of being, rather than selfishness.

There are a number of different components to gravitas. First, there is a certain level of substantive knowledge, intellectual horsepower and focus which is critical in establishing gravitas. We are able to successfully leverage our strengths but also recognize the limits of what we know and understand what we don't know, which allows us to seek the assistance of others as needed. This serves the greater good and is key in maintaining our credibility.

Our appearance and demeanor, which include how we look, dress and present ourselves in both formal and informal settings, are also important. There is a level of assertiveness and self-assuredness which goes hand in hand with gravitas, and these are inextricably linked with our posture, body language and level of engagement when interacting with others.

Maintaining eye contact, having a firm handshake, delivering effective presentations and projecting our voice when speaking are just a few of the

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many examples of how we exhibit gravitas.

Being a great communicator is also an essential ingredient. This means that we are able to take our knowledge and insight and successfully and passionately convey them to others in an inspiring way. We wholeheartedly believe in what we say and say what we believe.

We are persuasive and project confidence and composure in our oral and written communications. When we have a healthy dose of emotional intelligence, we have the tools to take these communications to an even higher level, since we are finely attuned to ourselves and others. We are keenly aware of our audience in any given situation and understand the various points of view.

We hear both what is said and unsaid and are able to read the room for clues and suggestions on how to make adjustments to

our approach in real time. Maintaining a high level of engagement in these situations is an important element of gravitas.

Developing and maintaining gravitas takes a lot of hard work. There is an age-old debate about whether it is something we are born with. As with most things in life, there are those who seem to effortlessly demonstrate gravitas, whereas others have a more difficult time with it.

Regardless of which camp we are in, everyone can take steps in developing and harnessing gravitas. Working with professionals such as executive coaches and soliciting honest, frank feedback from friends and colleagues about our personal effectiveness and our strengths and weaknesses can be effective tools in our development.

We also need to recognize that gravitas is not about bowling others over with how great we are. Rather, it is in the process of meaningfully connecting and making a positive difference, and in being kind and generous in the service of others, that our true essence, our gravitas, shines through. Whether we are born with it or are cultivating it from scratch, we must always look for ways to improve ourselves and our skills.

Gravitas is not just for politicians, newscasters and the C-suite anymore. Indeed, it has become increasingly important for all professionals, and lawyers in particular. Having gravitas helps to inspire the trust, confidence and peace of mind of clients.

Given the continued flat demand for legal services, clients are always seeking meaningful differentiators among their various service providers. Gravitas is often part of that "secret sauce" in the recipe for effectiveness and success.