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'Be a Goldfish' – The Wisdom of Ted Lasso for Lawyers

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Like everyone else during the pandemic, my wife and I binged a lot of television at night after exhausting days of working while watching our two kids. But by late fall, we had run out of shows.

Then we found Ted Lasso on Apple TV+, which we binged over two nights. The premise is that Ted Lasso, an American college football coach, becomes an English Premier League football (aka soccer) coach. Despite not knowing the slightest thing about soccer (like me), Ted wins over the team, its owners and the fans with his unorthodox coaching style.

What is striking about the show is not its humor (it is really funny though), it's the heart and message of the show. The show has great lessons on leadership, empathy, morality and ethics to help us become better attorneys and colleagues. Recently, I was proud to teach a CLE course on leadership lessons from Ted Lasso to the Dallas – Fort Worth Chapter of the Association of Corporate Counsel, which I attempt to summarize here.

Lead with empathy.

"For me, success is not about the wins and losses. It's about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves on and off the field." Ted knows nothing about soccer, but he is still an effective leader because he understands the people on the team, from the waterboy to the owner. He does this through engaging in a genuine effort to get to know each of them. Rather than barking orders at the team to enact his will, Ted tries to understand what each of those people needs to reach their full potential.

As attorneys, showing kindness and empathy is probably not our default position. But there's a difference between empathy and sympathy. Empathy is understanding someone by seeing the world through their point of view. This skill is important for attorneys for several aspects of our jobs, including being able to understand how opposing counsel may argue a case, what

an opposing party needs to get out of a transaction and even how to get the best out of our colleagues.

Be a happy warrior.

"We've got 90 minutes to prove them wrong." Ted gets criticized and called dirty names throughout the series, but never once does he retaliate or show anger. Instead, he understands why they are calling him names and realizes that the best way to change minds is through results.

Our Texas Lawyers' Creed tells us that we can "disagree without being disagreeable." But too often the members of our profession use disagreement as evidence of bad motive and every negative statement as an opportunity to tee off. It often creates a negative cycle from both sides. How many times have you had to endure a "beat the chest" speech by opposing counsel about why their side is pure as snow and your side is evil? But, how many times have you actually seen "chest beating" work? For Ted, he'd just smile, not respond and say, "Let's prove them wrong."

Be curious, not judgmental.

In one of the most famous scenes of the show, Ted makes a bet over a game of darts with the former owner of the team, Rupert Mannion. As Ted is beating him at darts, he says:

You know, Rupert, guys have underestimated me my entire life. And for years, I never understood why. It used to really bother me. But then one day, I was driving my little boy to school and I saw this quote by Walt Whitman. ... It said, "Be curious, not judgmental." I like that. So I get back in my car ... and all of a sudden it hits me. All them fellas that used to belittle me, not a single one of them were curious. You know, they thought they had everything all figured out. So they judged everything, and they judged everyone. ... 'Cause if they were

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curious, they would've asked questions. ... Like, 'Have you played a lot of darts, Ted?'

Ted ends up winning the darts game.

This is a common theme in the show, where Ted is underestimated but only because people failed to ask questions. Too often, attorneys get caught in this trap. This is a profession filled with Type A personalities where we all have supreme amounts of confidence. But hubris is different from confidence, and often quite self-destructive. To be effective you have to know what you are up against and you can only know that by being curious.

Empower your people.

"He's the one, coach. If we're going to make an impact here, the first domino that needs to fall is in that man's heart." Ted spends most of the episodes trying to empower the rest of the team to be leaders. One of his first missions is to turn around Roy Kent, the past-his-prime team captain. Ted doesn't delegate tasks to Roy, but instead empowers him to take on leadership of the team and handle things as a player-coach.

As attorneys, all we have to sell is our time (of which there is a finite amount). The only way to expand your reach is by having people you trust who can not only perform tasks, but can take ownership for you. You cannot micromanage someone into owning a matter. You have to empower and trust them.

Be a goldfish.

"You know what the happiest animal in the world is? It's a goldfish. It's got a 10-second memory." This is a clever repackaging of some ancient wisdom (i.e., Matthew 6:27: "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"), but it's incredibly important for attorneys.

How many nights have you laid in bed, unable to fall asleep because of some worry facing you on one of your matters? We have inherently stressful jobs with real consequences for our clients; but, having the ability to divorce the incident's emotions from the way to learn from it, is a gift to our own mental health.

Heath Cheek is a complex commercial litigation partner at Bell Nunnally. He can be reached at hcheek@bellnunnally.com, or via the firm's website: <https://www.bellnunnally.com>.