

Advice For 1st-Gen Lawyers Entering The Legal Profession

By **Nikki Hurtado** (August 29, 2025)

This fall will see the newest class of young associates join the ranks of law firms. For first-generation lawyers, that means stepping into a profession that was not built with your story in mind.

And they are far from a rare exception: According to the Law School Admission Council Inc., about three-quarters of students in recent years have been the first from their families to go to law school.

First-generation lawyers begin their professional journeys without the benefit of playbooks handed down by relatives who have already traveled the professional law path. This can be a disadvantage. Or it can be the young lawyer's greatest strength.



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I share this as a first-generation lawyer, born and raised in Miami by my Cuban-Mexican parents, who were the first from their families to build new lives in a new country. They taught me the value of education, goal-setting and perseverance, and those lessons have shaped every step of my path.

Now, as the first in my family to enter the legal profession, I carry their grit, work ethic and determination into my practice. Over the past year as a first-year lawyer, I've learned that those same qualities — working hard, figuring things out and refusing to quit — are just as essential to being a good lawyer as any skill you learn in law school.

When you don't know, ask.

In your first years of practice, there can be pressure to prove you're not just capable, but already polished. For first-generation lawyers, that pressure can feel even heavier. You're stepping into a profession without inherited know-how, but the truth is that no one expects you to know everything. They do, however, expect you to speak up when you don't.

It may feel intimidating when you don't know what a local rule means, or when you have no idea how to structure your argument in a motion to dismiss. But asking for help is not a sign of weakness or ignorance — it's how you get ahead. For first-generation lawyers, those questions are your lifeline.

Every time you give yourself permission to ask questions, you invite mentorship and open space for connection. Learning is part of lawyering.

Trust your instincts.

Instinct is an underappreciated skill in lawyering — one that is rarely part of formal training. It's the thread that runs through everything a lawyer does. It is the flutter of discomfort when a deposition answer feels rehearsed, the pause before you push further in a tough conversation with opposing counsel, the sense that a client doesn't understand despite nodding as if they do.

For first-generation lawyers, instinct may also be something you've developed long before you ever stepped into a law firm. Throughout your life, you may have learned to read

people, pick up patterns and sense shifts in tone — often because you've had to navigate unfamiliar spaces.

Trusting your gut doesn't mean relying on feelings over facts. It simply means honoring the wisdom you've obtained through your experience, resilience and careful observation of the world around you. It means not silencing the voice that says, "this doesn't sit right with me," just because you're the youngest or least experienced person in the room.

Your instincts got you this far — don't give up on them now.

Do it yourself.

As a first-generation lawyer, you've likely been figuring things out on your own your whole life. There wasn't always someone to explain the next step, and you're used to learning by doing. That habit, born from necessity, can become your edge.

It's the reason that, when someone hands you a project you've never seen before, your first instinct isn't panic. Rather, it's "I'll figure it out." And you do.

You may get support early on from paralegals, legal assistants or law clerks ready to help you meet a deadline. But don't just assign a task if you don't understand how to do it yourself. Before you assign a task, whether it be formatting a motion, scheduling a hearing or submitting a document via the filing portal, do it yourself first.

When you understand how the pieces fit together, you become more detail-oriented, more independent and, ultimately, more trustworthy as an attorney. Then later, when you're pressed for time or juggling five deadlines, you can delegate confidently — not blindly.

Delegation is a skill. But so is humility. Knowing when to ask, learn, or simply roll up your sleeves and figure it out matters just as much.

Speak clearly.

Think back to your first day of law school. As a first-generation lawyer, you probably didn't know what "jurisdiction" meant — at least not beyond what you'd seen in a courtroom drama. You may have nodded along, hoping you wouldn't get called on, quietly wondering if you were the only one trying to translate a foreign language in real time.

But then those terms became familiar, and the concepts started to make sense. You built your understanding brick by brick because you stayed in the room long enough to figure it out. For a first-generation lawyer, that persistence — born from having to figure out so much in life with a ready guide — is the same quality that will carry you through practice.

That experience matters when you talk to clients. Many of them are standing where you once stood. Many are new to the process and afraid to admit what they don't know. Your job isn't to sound impressive. Rather, it is to be clear.

Explain things the way you wish they'd been explained to you, plainly and clearly. Never assume understanding. That's not dumbing things down — it's lifting people up.

Be yourself.

First-year lawyers are taught the benefits of mirroring opposing counsel. Match their tone

and their tactics. But, for first-generation lawyers, there's value in knowing you don't have to mimic someone else's style to belong. Sometimes, the most strategic thing you can do is be the most gracious person in the room. Don't change who you are. There's a seat for you at the table, but you just have to find it.

A quick thank you, a friendly exchange and a quiet "hope you enjoy your weekend" aren't just pleasantries. They are part of a larger practice of how you show up in your work. When it's sincere, it can shift the dynamic in your favor.

Own your growth.

By your first anniversary as a lawyer, you will be better at legal research. You will write with more speed, clarity and purpose. You will start sending emails without asking a partner to review them. Your voice will begin to take shape in your motions, and your instincts will sharpen in depositions.

For first-generation lawyers, this growth can be even more meaningful. You began without the informal guidance others might take for granted, so every skill you've gained came from showing up, asking questions and figuring things out as you went. Each new skill is not just proof of progress — it's proof that you can build this career from the ground up.

Most importantly, you will learn more about yourself. You will learn at what time of day your mind is at its sharpest. You will learn what environments help you reset after a difficult call or a long day of brief writing. And you will learn how to recover from the mistakes that you will inevitably make.

You can only learn these things through the real work of becoming a lawyer. There are no shortcuts. The only way out is through.

Leave uncertainty behind.

If you speak another language, that's not just a bonus. That's access — to a wider community of people, to clients who might otherwise struggle to tell their story, to colleagues and even opposing counsel.

If you see the world through a different cultural or economic lens, let that inform how you listen, how you advocate and how you build trust. The stories you carry and the path you have walked do not detract from your legal acumen. They add to it!

Your first day, month or even year as a lawyer may not be marked by a party or a plaque for your office wall, or even by a glass of champagne, but it may mark the day you cross from uncertainty into professionalism — from law student to advocate.

So, cheers to the questions you'll ask, the instincts you'll follow, the mistakes you'll make, the people you'll help and the moments you'll trust yourself, even when it would be easier not to.

Your life as a successful lawyer is only just beginning.

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