

Bridge the Truth Gap, Own Your Mistakes

A NEW YEAR HAS BROUGHT A NEW AND decidedly bizarre political scandal from our neighbor (and my old home), the Garden State. The Christie administration has found itself on the wrong side of a truly bipartisan voter grievance: traffic. The true nature of Gov. Chris Christie's involvement, if any, with the George Washington Bridge debacle remains unclear, and will continue to be debated and investigated for months to come. One easily predictable development in "Bridgegate" has been Gov. Christie's repeated acknowledgement that "mistakes were made."

The unanswered questions are exactly whose mistakes they were, when the governor learned about them, and if efforts were made to obscure the truth.

The expression "mistakes were made" has been such a commonly used rhetorical device in American politics that it has earned its own Wikipedia entry. Presidents Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, and various other pols have used to expression to recognize a poorly handled situation,

without directly taking responsibility for their actions.

I do not raise these recent headlines to offer an opinion on Bridgegate, or any other political insight. Rather, hearing the old adage "mistakes were made" called to mind one of the best pieces of advice I can offer to young lawyers. In the practice of law, mistakes will be made. Especially in litigation, junior associates are charged with juggling a number of responsibilities, such as answering discovery, producing documents, and meeting filing deadlines. In the course of a career, mistakes like missed deadlines or inadvertent disclosures can happen to the most diligent attorneys. Sometimes mistakes take the form of an embarrassing typo. The "D" key's proximity to the "R" key once caused me to call the Emergency Room the Emergency "Doom" in defending a

By Edward F. Beitz



medical malpractice case! It's a funny story that did not feel so funny at the time.

It has been my experience that acknowledging and taking responsibility for our mistakes is just as important as trying to avoid them, and it is the only way to properly learn from them. In busy legal practices, a number

of different people have their hands on a file, be they lawyers, assistants, legal secretaries or paralegals, and there can be temptation to pass the blame on to someone else, or simply ignore a mistake until it becomes someone else's problem. Most folks have had a co-worker like this at one time or another, who is more concerned with figuring out how to lay responsibility at another's feet than finding a solution.

In my first (and thus far only) job in the practice of law, I was very lucky to find a firm culture that made it very easier to bring my missteps to the partners and senior associates. This is not to suggest I made a habit of yelling the sky was falling as soon as I found a problem. Rather, I learned early on to provide my bosses with a clear explanation of what had happened, how it happened, suggestions to fix it, and how to avoid a similar mistake in the future. As long as I have held up my end of that responsibility, the bosses

have had my back in working out a solution.

Unlike other professions where mistakes can be permanent or even fatal, most of the missteps made by lawyers can be fixed by an honest admission of fault and a timely correction. Even serious errors, like a lapsed statute of limitations, will only be made worse by hiding from your mistake. As I have developed professionally, and begun supervising the work of junior associates, I have tried to engender the same culture of forthrightness and personal responsibility that was established by my mentors. I want the junior associates working with me to feel they can admit their mistakes and know that, as long as they are honest about it, we will work together to find a solution.

It is my hope that young lawyers reading this will keep it in mind next time they find a slipup. While this advice might seem obvious, it is never hard to find a story about a lawyer's dishonesty in the news. It is easy to say "mistakes were made," but it takes strength and character to look your boss or client in the eye and say, "mistakes were made by me." It might be more difficult in the short run, but it will let your boss know that you are a person of integrity who can be trusted to help manage their caseload.

Edward F. Beitz (beitz@whiteandwilliams.com), an associate with White and Williams LLP, is chair of the Young Lawyers Division.

We proudly announce

The Honorable

Sandra Mazer Moss (Ret.)

has joined

The

Dispute Resolution Institute

upon her retirement from the

Common Pleas Court of Philadelphia

January 2014

Cases Now Being Accepted for ADR with Judge Moss



Harris T. Bock, Esq.
Director

The
Dispute Resolution Institute
ARBITRATION / MEDIATION / SETTLEMENT CONFERENCES
DISCOVERY-SPECIAL MASTER / APPELLATE ADVISING
Suite 660 • Two Logan Square
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103
800-656-1237 • 215-656-4374
FAX: 215-656-4089 • www.adrdri.com

VIP Honors Volunteer Weisgold

PHILADELPHIA VIP RECOGNIZES ANTHONY B. QUINN as Volunteer of the Month for his commitment to helping low-income families remain in their homes.

Quinn is a solo practitioner at Quinn Law Offices, the firm he founded in 1981. He is a real estate attorney who has represented low-income homeowners as a VIP volunteer since 2009. Thus far, he has handled 13 VIP homeownership cases.

"Tony will take on any homeownership case regardless of how complicated it is. He also stands by his clients no matter how difficult their lives may be. He goes above and beyond what we expect from our volunteers and we appreciate how hard he fights to generate a positive outcome for his clients," said VIP staff attorney Roxane Crowley.

Quinn is currently assisting a client who signed a mortgage for more than what the house was worth. All of the client's money

went to contractors and the broker who helped the client sign this mortgage is now awaiting trial in federal court. The home is in foreclosure and Tony has been working to help the client buy time until he can find other housing. Tony is trying to help the client buy a new home with a reverse mortgage. "It's really tough to do a reverse mortgage to buy a house. It really doesn't fit into the requirements that the federal government has in place but we can use a little creativity. I'm hoping to get him [the client] into a house," he said. Successfully executing a reverse mortgage is a hard task but one that Quinn welcomes. He works diligently to ensure sound housing for his clients, particularly in the cold winter months.

Quinn is an experienced volunteer who uses creative lawyering to find solutions for his VIP clients.