

23 August 2021

**MASS CALL SPEECH BY PRESIDENT OF THE LAW
SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE, GREGORY VIJAYENDRAN SC,
AT MASS CALL 2021**

1. May it please Your Honour, on behalf of the Law Society, I seek Your Honour's leave to address the 2021 cohort of applicants seeking admission to the Singapore Bar.
2. Kudos to all of you for your fine feat in overcoming different tests and trials to arrive at this major destination in your life that doubles up as a starting point in your career.
3. At the end of this unique virtual Bar Call hearing, you will have the incredible privilege, conjoint with the solemn responsibility, of being placed on the rolls of the Supreme Court of Singapore. You will become an elite member of a noble and honourable legal profession. Membership has its special privileges but also its solemn responsibilities.
4. This morning, at this august ceremony, I want to speak to you about the ABCs of legal practice.
5. A is for Adopt. For those of you who intend to practise, you need to adopt a mentor. This may sound counter-intuitive. Your place in your law firm was the direct result of a law firm offer. In other words, at first blush, your supervising solicitor chose you to be relevant legal trainee, practice

trainee and thereafter, post-retention, chose you going forward to be part of his or her legal team. In that sense, your mentor adopted you. But I would submit to you that it is actually a two-way street. You adopt your mentor too. You had, and continue to have, a choice whom you want to work for and work with. It is not just about the technical brilliance or smarts of the lawyer mentoring you. It is also about the ethos, virtues and qualities in that mentor that you wish to be identified with. You eschewed the tormentor and found a senior lawyer who is a profession father or mother to nurture you. Having a good mentor is particularly pertinent in the first few years of practice.

6. In some setups, the senior lawyer may not have the bandwidth to train you from scratch all, or even most of, the time. In law firms with team-based structures, some mentoring could be a function of a cascading mentorship model. In that case, discern and understand both the culture and sub-culture of the set up you join.
7. Why is it important to adopt right? In your early years, habits are being formed. You will find that it is much harder to unlearn bad habits than to learn good habits. Imbibe and internalize from a team lead, especially one on top of their game, who can impart legal skills. But life in the law is more than about technical legal ability. It is also about making the right judgment calls in the client's interests. It is about the continuing apprenticeship and coping tips too from practitioners who have lasted the pace with sheer staying power. Such learnings will short cut your learning curve and reduce accidents waiting to happen. Adopting a right mentor is both life defining and life changing. If you follow well after someone who leads well, you will accelerate your career growth and find a maturity that belies your years early on in your career.

8. To augment, complement and supplement the mentorship, we have two distinct mentor schemes at the Law Society. First, our PracMentor scheme. Senior practitioners who serve as a first port of call to consult on a novel, arcane area. The aim is to give you a roadmap to navigate a practice area that is uncharted waters. Of course, you need to do your own research. No spoon feeding of answers. But our scheme is akin to a resident expert consultation when you can walk into a senior partner's office and get guidance. In truth, legal practice is less about what you know and more about where to go (resource or reference wise) to find out what to know.
9. There is a second type of mentorship, a Relational Mentorship, pairing you with a big brother or big sister in law. The relational mentor (or RM) will guide you on ethical conundrums, share stress management tips and furnish career counselling tips as well. You do not need to be in crisis mode or facing a problem to ask for an RM. But when you do have relevant issues or challenges, it pays to have an RM with whom you already enjoy a friendship with. Relationship undergirds this mentorship. So, avail yourself of this.
10. Adopt best practices. When I started practice in a large firm and had to work with different partners in dispute resolution, a guiding piece of wisdom that I applied was to adopt an ethos of learning the best from everyone I worked with. Don't learn the worst from each person! Keep the baby but throw out the bath water. Every senior you work with, irrespective of the number of years under their belt, will have something edifying to offer you if you are willing to learn. Learn the best technical knowhow, skill sets or practice pointers from each senior. Research

ability, drafting skills, negotiation techniques, client management soft skills, court craft and of course, niche specialist experience and expertise. Watching maestros in law practice at work is watching poetry in motion. And if you have an open mind and can discern the giftings or talents in people around you, you can adopt the best of them as your own. The reality is that people around us are only gifts given to us for a season.

11. Last year, in my Mass Call speech, I said *“In your early years, you will emulate or simulate the style of your mentor. That is natural. It is not a total eclipse of your potential stardom or a wholesale effacing of your individuality. So, absorb like a sponge as you look and learn. You first adopt but will later adapt. But there will come a time when you will develop your own style and tweaks that will be uniquely, inimitably your own.”* So, there is nothing shameful or wrong about adopting the strong positive habits and even style of your mentor. There is no copyright in practising well; only that you must copy right.
12. Adopt the right posture too. Part of it is the underlying theme of learning that I touched on. But there are other dimensions. One of them is about taking setbacks and failures in your stride. You will not always be in top form or score a perfect 10 like Chinese diver Quan Hongchan in the recent Tokyo Olympics or Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci in the 1976 Montreal Olympics. There will be blind spots. As you grow in experience, you will reduce both quality and quantity of errors and grow in self-assurance and self-confidence. But at this early stage, take reproof and rebuke in your stride. You may have excelled in the school of law. But the school of legal practice involves plenty of hard knocks because it

concerns the dynamics of real-time application of law. As Paul Arden wrote¹: “*Do not seek praise, seek criticism*” he made the point that “*If, instead of seeking approval, you ask “What’s wrong with it? How can I make it better?”, you are more likely to get a truthful, critical answer*” Yet I assure you that there are intangible rewards that await. You will derive deep meaning and fulfilment as you (1) resolve your client’s problem intellectually; (2) become the voice for your client in advocacy; or (3) structure a corporate transaction or conveyancing deal to attain your client’s objective with business acumen.

13. Apart from heeding the counsel and correction of seniors, a foundational point is that the legal profession is a profession of honour. And so, one of the right postures to adopt is to consistently honour the Court, your client, your counterparties and your colleagues. Bear in mind that your colleagues are not just limited to fellow members of the Bar but also include the paralegals, secretaries, court clerks and other non-legally trained personnel. You can only honour the people around you when you are especially sensitized to their needs, interests and overall wellbeing (including psychological wellness). At a time when we zoom in and out of meetings in a new normal, this can prove challenging. As we all readily appreciate, we engage with, and perceive using, two of our senses during virtual meetings and hearings. Neurological studies have shown that the brain goes on hyperdrive during online engagements to process non-verbal cues like facial expressions, tone and pitch of voice and body language.² The corollary to this is that even the best of us can miss out on clues and cues of people’s emotions and comfort levels during our remote meetings. This is a time when we

¹ Paul Arden “It’s Not How Good You Are, It’s How Good You Want To Be.” at 26-27

² See e.g. Manyu Jiang “The Reason Zoom Calls Drain Your Energy” BBC (23 April 2020)

need to be even more attuned to the people around us. To extend even more grace and kindness including for those around us facing unusual mental health challenges.

14. B is for Build. Build a library of experiences. Your practice toolkit is not only limited to a practice training contract checklist during the practice trainee period. (Of course, to the extent that there are gaps during your practice training period, prioritize plugging that in practice). But the bigger picture point I am making is for you to have a checklist for your new experiences in living life in the law. Your first criminal mention. Your first negotiation. Your first family court hearing. Your first mediation. Your first contested case. Your first pro bono case. Your first attendance at a Court of Appeal hearing. And so on. Go for it with gusto. The freshness, dynamism and enthusiasm that comes with building a library of novel experiences will keep you first, waking up each day filled with first, motivation and secondly, passion and pride at what you are building day by day. This will be a truism for every stage of life including as a senior lawyer. Last year, I did drugs for the first time (!)... it was my first criminal case, since starting legal practice, representing an accused charged for drug consumption. The excitement and freshness of that experience stayed with me. But to build the best experience, I also adopted a mentor, Peter Fernando, who was co-counsel with me for that case.
15. The story was told by Dale Carnegie about two men looking out from prison bars. One saw the mud and the other saw stars. We can either choose to see the toil and drudgery of the regular routines or the sparkle of gems in the mundane moments. Experiencing the humdinger in the humdrum.

16. One of the best buildings you can construct is a library of precedents. Everything you have done including the corrections applied by your mentors. For many years, I kept the very first letter I crafted as a pupil. The only thing that survived my pupil master's pen was a comma in my draft! I didn't retain that precedent for self-flagellation purposes but as a visual reminder of the skilled craftsmanship to aspire towards.. When you research a question, although you should as a general rule be focussed and pin point precise in your answer, it has proven helpful for me the very first time researching a novel area to go the extra mile. If your research note is thorough and comprehensive, it could become an invaluable aide memoire the next time you have a question on a related area.
17. Build your reputation. In 2018, I gave a Mass Call speech about how reputation is the greatest asset you could have as your lawyer. I said then: "*Reputation is the asset worth pricing and prizing. The liability, if you have a besmirched name, will be an albatross hanging around your neck.*" Even if yours is ultimately a short stint in legal practice, it could still prove memorable. You will leave with your head held high, conscience completely clear and an impeccable professional repute with Bar and Bench (for litigators) that will position you well for your next life calling.
18. Build your confidence and client judgment calls. One of the best ways to do that is to undertake pro bono cases. Some of you started your pro bono journey in law school. Pro bono gives you a worthy cause to spend your life on, a purpose beyond yourself and imbues you with deep meaning and fulfilment. It is the hidden fuel to sustain your journey in the practice of law over the long haul. So that practitioners will stay as stayers and sustain practice.

19. Linking back to my first point, adopt a firm with an ethos of doing pro bono. A culture of altruistic commitment will make a world of difference to your practice and make a difference to the world of the indigent assisted. There are diverse causes that you can nurture your unique passions and practice interests in. As a sampler, at the Law Soc Pro Bono Services side, we have, among others, criminal legal representation, family justice representation, charities governance advisories, employment law issues and migrant worker justice causes.
20. Finally, C is for create. Create value by innovating. As digital natives, harness the power of technology. Technology and law is a pivotal topic in practice. I commend you to read the Honourable the Chief Justice' Sundaresh Menon's speeches touching on tech including the Mass Call Speeches last year and in 2019. His Honour was sounding the clarion call to lawyers to, among others, embrace change and future-ready themselves to brace for the onslaught of the ongoing Digital Revolution. These speeches, containing world class legal thought leadership, envision the not-so-distant future that you will live in and the practical skill sets and outlooks to thrive in that future.
21. But back from the future to the present. What you are experiencing now is a unique, exceptional and perhaps surreal experience in this Mass Call Ceremony. There is one principal reason we can do this in Singapore. Our collective commitment to make things work and work better. As Singaporeans, we have pragmatically unlocked the value of technology to be faster, more cost-efficient and accurate. As we build from that baseline, we should let machines do what machines do best in high tech. So that we as humans can do what we do best in high touch. So

that man and machine can together build high trust with our clients.

22. The other higher order question is, as we move beyond the basics, how can we create value by becoming inventors and innovators? Max Planck, 1918 winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics quipped: “*A creative scientist needs an artistic imagination*”. Can your generation ride the technology wave with nimbleness and agility as tech-vocates and legalpreneurs?
23. On the Law Society’s side, we are committed to creating value by innovation. We seized the day last year by innovating an online mediation modality for our Law Society Mediation Services. Necessity is the mother of invention. A silver lining in our COVID-19 year.
24. Creativity comes about because we cultivate a sense of curiosity and commitment to lifelong learning. Create your own unique individual pathways of practice education. The Singapore Academy of Law’ LIFTED initiative launched a brilliant app that went live last week helping users track their own learning journey. The LIFTED LinkedIn Learning Pathways account enables a world first of social legal learning in a digital age. Separately, if you discern a penchant for a particular practice area in law, pursue it passionately. Take the plunge. Do a deep dive to learn all that you can about that area. Even if it means mastering the domain expertise involved by taking time and thought to read outside the law.
25. One example (but not the only one) of a potential greenfield area despite the economic doldrums is intellectual property or IP. IP Week, beginning tomorrow, is one of the premier international IP events and reinforces

Singapore's reputation as a burgeoning global hub for intangible assets and IP. Various changes introduced by policymakers such as the Law Ministry creates an ecosystem that flourishes and nourishes greater professionalism and specialist expertise among IP lawyers. It positions us well regionally by increasing value of work undertaken. Such initiatives raise the profile of IP law and also attract newly-qualified lawyers such as some of you practising in this area. IPOS also launched the Young IP Mediator initiative last year in partnership with local universities. This is truly an exciting time to be a young IP lawyer.

26. IP is only one illustration of a growth area. There are also other areas heralding promise for the future such as blockchain technology and regulatory compliance. There could be a heavy investment of time to specialize in some of these areas over and above mastering the nuts and bolts of legal practice. But to build a firm foundation, you need to create breadth, length and depth. Your unique value proposition as a lawyer with niche expertise will differentiate you from the pack.

27. Last but not least, create space and time for yourself. At the risk of over-simplification, introverts and extroverts recharge their batteries differently. Introverts lose energy, but extroverts gain energy, when they are with people. So, rejuvenate during your weekend, downtime and timeouts in the way that works best for you – whether chilling out with friends or indulging in a hobby. There are also creative pursuits aplenty outside your law practice that could prove refreshing to body, soul and spirit.

28. There is undoubtedly a steep learning curve in your first few years of practice. But even with all the time pressures, stresses and strains and striving to attain the holy grail of a work-life balance or equilibrium, be intentional to carve out time and space for yourself. This is self-care. It will foster mental wellness and guard your psychosocial wellbeing.

Conclusion

29. Adopt, Build, Create. Adopting addresses, to some extent, the question of who you are. Building largely answers the question of what you do. And creating gives part of the solution to the complex question of where you go. The ABCs of legal practice.
30. In closing, to the 2021 cohort, I encourage you to express appreciation in your own way to your parents, family members and loved ones who have sacrificed for, supported and cheered you on from the sidelines of your Olympic-esque journey to the Bar call. Some of them are present with you to witness this major milestone of your life in law. For gathered kin, this one moment in time is as much your celebration to share in as your loved one enters into the noble calling of law.
31. And to our newly called lawyers, once again, please accept my heartiest congratulations on behalf of the Law Society Council to you on your admission to the Singapore Bar.

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