Law School's Missed Lessons: Learning From Failure

By **Brooke Pauley** (July 30, 2025)

While law school teaches everything from civil procedure to stare decisis, there are some aspects of practicing law that aren't covered during the three years that lead up to the bar exam. In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys offer advice on navigating real-world aspects of legal practice that are often overlooked in law school. If there is a professional skill you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.


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In law school, you learn about the importance of precision, correctness and perfection. Between the grading curve and learning the art of legal writing, it's natural to believe that meticulous perfection is the only way to succeed. This pressure can be brutal and can lead to self-doubt over the slightest human error.

If you're anything like me, and like many other law students, you're probably already your own harshest critic — constantly pushing yourself toward some higher, shinier version of "achievement."

Then you graduate, you start practicing, and suddenly you're thrown into a fast-paced world of uncertainty, ambiguity, and what feels like an endless stream of feedback and advice on how to improve. It can be daunting to be surrounded by partners you want to impress, judges before whom you want to perform well and colleagues who have been doing this a lot longer than you have.

Law is one of the few professions where you prepare your arguments, present them in front of a judge, and then hear a clear decision on who wins and who loses. It reminds me of cheer competitions growing up, where weeks of practice could be undone with one foot out of bounds, and the anxiety that brings as you're on deck about to be called.

I still relive the time I was too excited at regionals and over-rotated on my tumbling pass, securing our team second place by tenths of a point. It's been years since I had any business even thinking about a spring floor, but I still feel those "If only I had ..." thoughts sweeping past my mind every now and then.

Law is filled with those moments that we classify as personal failure. In a job where every detail is important, even small mistakes feel grave. Forgetting a talking point at an oral argument, missing a copy of a document for a judge, or even just saying something awkward in front of your coworkers might feel like a moral and intellectual flaw. But the truth is that "failure" in those moments is not the opposite of progress. It is the progress.

Don't just take it from me, though. Lisa Blatt at Williams & Connolly LLP, who has argued more than 50 cases in front of the U.S. Supreme Court (more than any other woman), puts it this way: "Failure and humiliation are part of life. And work is no different."[1]

In fact, Blatt openly admits that she can count many more jobs and clients that she did not get than she has. Her point is this: If something does not work for you, you can always walk away. But do not let the fear of being seen — flaws and all — stop you from showing up or

giving it another go when failure comes along.

Failure is inevitable. And if it's inevitable, then we can't outrun it. We must necessarily learn how to use it for good: as a tool for growth in our practice. That starts with challenging our instinct to reject failure and defend ourselves from it as much as we can. Failure has something to teach us if we let it reveal itself to us, but only if we allow it to humble us, and only if we're able to admit when we're wrong.

One of the upsides of being surrounded by people who have been practicing law longer than you is that you'll be surrounded by an incredible wealth of knowledge from others who have had their fair share of slip ups, war stories and things they still laugh off today. Whether that be other members of our firm, bar association members, peers from law school or other connections in the community, there is almost always someone who wants to help and share knowledge if we ask for it.

I'm especially grateful for the partners at my firm who have invested time in mentoring junior associates and reminding me that there's almost always a solution — if you're willing to look for it and take ownership of the cleanup work, if any.

Getting to that point requires ego reduction. It takes a lot to admit a mistake. I've started viewing my errors as a virus to eradicate. Extended exposure can cause more potential damage, and I want to eliminate it before it spreads elsewhere.

In the legal world, where deadlines rule everything, time is of the essence, and you want it to be on your side. Addressing issues as soon as they arise gives you more time to problem-solve, and it reduces stress, protects your mental clarity and prevents the issue from affecting others.

Waiting until the last minute to bring something up creates unnecessary grunt work for everyone. In contrast, raising the issue early allows time for brainstorming and collaborative problem-solving, which can streamline the process and significantly reduce cleanup work.

That said, before bringing an issue to someone else, first try to solve it on your own. If you don't yet have a solution, come prepared with the facts and anticipate likely questions. That kind of preparation and honesty demonstrates ownership and provides an opportunity to self-teach and redirect. When we retrace our steps, pinpoint where things went wrong and understand why, we gain insight that not only helps us now, but also equips us to guide others in the future and avoid our own future mistakes.

In this light, failure isn't defeat, it's redirection. It's a signal that something isn't working, and that signal becomes a new data point in your arsenal of knowledge.

Maybe it's something small: "I tried searching for this in our e-discovery database and learned it has to be done a certain way." Or maybe it's something more strategic: "This judge does not entertain theatrics." Or maybe it's something with even higher stakes: "The jury did not agree with our theory of the case." None of that is failure. It's valuable knowledge gained through real experience.

And besides, no matter how you feel — or how severe the misstep — failure is not a permanent label. It's a moment, a snapshot in time. Although it's uncomfortable, it makes us human, relatable and, frankly, more interesting. Failure gives us perspective we couldn't otherwise earn.

The best lawyers are often the ones who connect deeply with human experience. Those who empathize with their clients, understand different perspectives, and know what it means to fall and get back up are the ones we want representing us in the courtroom, not just someone who is perfect. The ability to recover, rethink and reshape is the real talent.

So, as you leave law school and step into your firm, clerkship, internship or even just the haze of bar exam prep, don't beat yourself up for making mistakes. You will make them. Some will be big, and some will be small. Some you'll remember for the rest of your career. But when those moments come, don't run from them: Stand them down, befriend them and take every lesson they offer you and use it.

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[1] Lisa Blatt, Reflections of a Lady Lawyer, 98 Tex. L. Rev. 57 (2020).