

What I Wish I Knew Then: Anthony Crowell

By Steve Cohen

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Anthony Crowell is the Dean and President of New York Law School. Prior to assuming those positions in 2012, he was counselor to Mayor Michael Bloomberg for more than a decade.

The Birth of a Career

I graduated from the University of Pennsylvania's Urban Studies Program where I studied policy and planning, and developed an interest in law. I was fascinated by how cities functioned, how people came together and built communities and how good leadership, operations and public integrity were distinguishing factors in how some cities worked much better than others.

My first job out of college was at the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) in Washington. ICMA is the national association for professional city managers in jurisdictions with a "council-manager" form of government as opposed to that of a "strong mayor." I loved the early work I did analyzing the impact of unfunded federal mandates on states and localities, and helping to build a coalition of the different groups representing state and city interests to advocate for major procedural and substantive reforms in Congress and administrative agencies. The intergovernmental dynamics were fascinating and the work was meaningful. I loved the bigness of the issues, but "the plan" was only to stay only a year and then head off to law school.



New York Law School Dean and President Anthony W. Crowell at the New York Law School Gala on November 12, 2014.

Embrace the Unexpected

During that first year, I had two terrific mentors who took a great interest in young professionals, their potential and their careers. They understood how to get the best out of people and said to me, "Look, there are going to be some changes here and we know you want to go to law school. But have you thought about going to law school in the evening, a lot of people who work on the Hill do it?"

I really hadn't considered going part-time. But they made it very attractive: I would be promoted into a role more directly focused on law, be better paid, and ICMA would cover part of my tuition. I always had a part-time job as an undergraduate and valued gaining experience. Although this departure from the expected would be a bit unconventional, I

thought attending law school in the evening could present both welcome practical and financial benefits, and still keep me “on plan” for a law degree. Since I was a first-gen college student, and would be paying for law school myself, it seemed to make good sense. But what I didn’t appreciate was that, at 23, I also would be the youngest student in the evening class at American University’s Washington College of Law.

I was relatively new to the professional world, and working a full-time job during the day and attending school four nights a week meant that I had to work extra hard to keep pace with my experienced and high-powered classmates. Many of them were well established professionals—including senior congressional staffers, engineers, and medical doctors. I loved the real world experience of analyzing the impacts of federal law and policy on local governments, along with my new work, which included working alongside lawyers preparing amicus briefs to the U.S. Supreme Court in city and state cases.

But, working full time and going to school was much harder than I had anticipated. And, while an evening program was absolutely the right choice for me, I have come to wonder what waiting another two years to go to law school—to still work, but see a bit more of the world and understand myself better—would have yielded. My parents were always incredibly supportive, but I think the grit and tenacity that you see in first-gen students can also result in an occasional rigidity where staying on track and avoiding the potential for distraction can become an overarching theme for us. I didn’t give myself permission to go slowly and take more time off. I didn’t have the benefit of someone saying, “you don’t need to rush.”

While I don’t have any regrets, I do have a bit more perspective, and recognize that when you commit to a profession like law, that requires a high degree of precision and relentlessness, there is seemingly no recapturing the freedom of

those early years once you get started. So when I have the chance to share this perspective with prospective students, whom I think might benefit from some more time before law school, I don’t hesitate.

Trust the Process

While I loved the job in Washington, the work I was doing made me want to go to work as a city attorney the minute I graduated from law school. The fact that I didn’t have as much student debt as some of my classmates made the natural attraction to public service an easier choice. I said to myself, “If you’re going to do that after the D.C. experience, you better go big, and that means New York.” I submitted one application for an on-campus interview with the New York City Law Department, and shortly thereafter was hired by then Corporation Counsel Paul Crotty, now an S.D.N.Y. District Court Judge. Interestingly, 15 years later, Judge Crotty’s brother Jerry, New York Law School’s Board Vice Chair, helped lead the search committee that recruited me as New York Law School dean.

At the Law Department, the first division I was assigned to was “Condemnation and Certiorari.” My division chief, Liz Botwin, was terrific: she understood me and in our first meeting said: “I’m not sure why you’re in my division. I’m excited to have you, but I’m not sure it’s the right fit for you.” She used that word “fit,” and it never left me. Because ultimately “fit” can play a huge role in happiness and success.

I liked learning about real property valuation and tax assessments. But the hyper-specialized subject matter and nature of the day-to-day practice was radically different from the broader work and impacts I hoped to have as a city attorney. I was given important and unique opportunities to learn law, grow, and demonstrate my skills there, all of which I needed to understand were part of “the process” for me to earn a spot where I ultimately wanted to be. I

needed to trust that process, and the leadership I was working under, to get there. This is a concept, I realize, that too many young lawyers, and young professionals generally, often fail to grasp.

The Law Department is exceptional in this way, and so many others. Because of the initial work I did, and because I asked to serve on some special litigation projects outside my division where I was able to draw on my experience working on Supreme Court amicus briefs, I was able to prove my readiness. After two years, I landed a coveted position in the Legal Counsel Division, typically reserved for more senior attorneys. It was the perfect fit, and I was able to dig into an array of very high-profile issues, including core governance and crisis management, which drew me to the city in the first place. It was there that I was also inspired, and encouraged, to develop a course in state and local government law, drawing directly on my work in Washington, and began teaching as an adjunct professor at “another law school across the river” (Brooklyn Law School) when I was 29.

Among my work, I was assigned to the emergency management portfolio, and worked on a range of issues with the Office of Emergency Management, including the legal analysis tied to the city’s bioterrorism preparedness plan. This led to my work on 9-11 response recovery, which included serving as the Law Department’s point person at the Pier 92 Emergency Command Center, and later as counsel to the Family Assistance Center, where I directed the highly complex expedited death certificate program. Those unique experiences were what ultimately led to my move from the Law Department and to City Hall and the Bloomberg Administration where I would work on many more 9-11 issues for years to come.

Lifelong Learning as Student of Human Nature

I can’t remember a time when I didn’t have a job. I started working when I was 11 or 12 years

old delivering newspapers and mowing lawns. This allowed me to learn early on how to work with a lot of different people—mostly good, but certainly not all easy. There’s a lot that you have to learn along the way, and a lot of lumps you have to take, to become effective at working with people. In fact, every single day I ask myself before going to sleep “What did you learn today? What did you learn about yourself, and about others around you? What could you do better?”

I think lawyers too often act like they are always in the driver’s seat. Instead, one of the best things for a lawyer to be able to do is to talk a little less and listen a little more. When you’re exercising authority as a lawyer, you have to ensure that the representation and advice you’re giving somebody is the very best. But you can’t make up someone else’s facts or feelings. You have to listen to them and get into their head and heart to really understand who they are, what they really want, but also to learn what they need or are willing to accept.

One of the most memorable conversations about understanding people was with Patti Harris, who was Mayor Bloomberg’s first deputy mayor and who, like the mayor himself, taught me so much about service, leadership and people management. We talked about the importance of understanding human nature when making decisions that affect others. There’s the way you may logically hope or want someone to respond, but human nature does not always permit the desired outcome. You must do the hard work first, employ a great deal of self-awareness, have empathy for others, and understand where they are coming from to develop a sound plan that leads people forward.

For lawyers and executives, these must be fundamental considerations. And understanding human nature is never a skill that is perfected.

As the world rapidly changes, individual and societal shifts must be observed and reflected in your ever-evolving thought process. That's why a lawyer must always know and engage in what is happening in the world around them—understanding the ebb and flow of positive and negative influences—and commit to being a perpetual student of human nature.

Accountability, Humility and Everything In Between

I think it's important for students to own what it means to be self-aware and accountable. And, they must understand that early-on in their career. I talk with students a lot about being the "adult in the room" and about "being indispensable." This is particularly important not only in the earliest days of their career, but at the outset of every new job and leadership role. You want to show whomever it is you work for that you are indispensable. I think the best way to do that is by being *low maintenance and high output*. That is what a lawyer should be.

Being a lawyer is about a life in service to others. Being low maintenance means it's about someone else's needs first, about giving far more than you take, working towards the promise of a just result, not the promise of how good you as a lawyer can look in the process. That's the soul-satisfying part of the job. It's a wonderful thing to have contributed to making one person's life—or 8.5 million people's lives—better, different, more prosperous or hopeful. Every lawyer deserves to have that feeling, but it's got to start with humility and subordinating your ego.

In the end, perhaps the best reminder for law students and lawyers is to never show more ambition than good judgment.

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