

CRAIN'S

If I Knew Then...

In this ongoing series, we ask executives, entrepreneurs and business leaders about mistakes that have shaped their business philosophy.

Edward Nusbaum

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By *James Mosher*



Background:

Westport-based [Law Offices of Edward Nusbaum](#) bills itself as a “boutique” family law practice whose clients are often high-net-worth individuals residing in Fairfield County. Edward Nusbaum has been practicing family law exclusively for more than 35 years.

The Mistake:

Thinking law school would teach me all I needed to know to become a trial lawyer. I walked into a courtroom after law school and I could tell that I wasn't prepared for this arena. That's not an uncommon mistake. The law schools are often weak in preparing students for the practical workings of the courtroom.

In law school, many people develop this idea that once you have your degree the seas are going to part and everyone will recognize how great you are. That's not how our world works.

What I walked in on during my first court day as a newly minted lawyer was the "short calendar." That's when motions are argued prior to trial or post-judgment. Not Perry Mason stuff. Kind of dull. But even that convinced me I needed more preparation. I stayed and watched and spent additional sessions watching the short calendar. That helped.

Wrestling in high school and college has helped me succeed at law. Wrestling and law are one-on-one competitions. I hate to lose so wrestling taught me that to avoid losing I had to work harder than the other guy. You have to learn from your mistakes and try not to repeat those mistakes.

I also naively believed that opposing counsel would give you some latitude, especially when you're just starting out. That was another mistake. Learning from this, I realized that preparation needed to be deep and wide.

When I was getting ready for my first case before the (Connecticut) Supreme Court I memorized the seating chart of the judges, including their names. I didn't want to leave anything to chance. It wasn't a major point — a procedural deficiency, actually — that I was arguing, but I did get the win. It felt great getting my first Supreme Court win at 25.

"You can't teach experience."

The Lesson:

You have to be prepared at all times and there is no substitute for experience. You can't teach experience.

You're going to make mistakes, so you need a mentor. Some young lawyers set up on their own and dive right in. Few succeed doing it that way.

It used to be that you would need three years experience before you could be lead counsel during a trial. At our firm it's seven or eight years before we let them be lead counsel on what we consider to be a plain case. Our firm deals with a lot of high-worth cases so it's crucial that we get it right and not miss anything. Usually there's no going back to fix things.

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