

Working with your Lawyer

How to save time and money – and achieve the best outcome.

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Before you hire a lawyer to represent you in your divorce, you need to learn this important truth: you and your lawyer will become partners, for better or for worse, during and perhaps for years after the divorce process. And how well your partnership works can have an enormous affect upon the process and outcome of your divorce - and how much you'll have to spend in legal fees along the way.

So you must make every effort to hire the right lawyer from the outset. Examine your goals and desires before going to see a lawyer. Do you want to be generous, or nail your ex to the wall? Do you want an amicable or an adversarial divorce? Look to your future, and determine what you want for yourself, your kids, and your ex in six months, one year, and five years.

After your initial conversation with a lawyer, you should be able to answer these questions:

- Does this lawyer listen to me when I talk?
- Is the lawyer interested in what my goals are, or only in his or her own goals?

Don't share a lawyer with your spouse, and don't hire your spouse's best friend (even if he or she is a friend of yours, too), business partner, or any member of your spouse's family to represent you - even if you're on good terms with them. Aside from the obvious conflict of interest, you'll create enemies - and probably a whole new family feud - before your divorce settles.

What your lawyer needs to know

Once you've chosen a lawyer, you'll need to provide information and direction to him or her. When your lawyer requests information, respond as quickly, completely, and concisely as you can - don't waste your own and your lawyer's time by writing a 24-page document when all that was required was a "yes" or "no" answer.

Of course, every case is unique, but the following checklist will give you an idea of what information your lawyer will need. You'll need to disclose:

- Why you are seeking a divorce. What caused your breakup? Are you sure you want to end the marriage, or is the visit to a lawyer meant to be a wake-up call to your spouse? If you're secretly hoping for a reconciliation, then you and your lawyer are working towards different goals.
- Personal data about you, your spouse, and your children (if any). Write down your names (maiden name, too, if applicable); your home and work addresses and telephone numbers; your ages and places of birth; your Social Security or Social Insurance Numbers; your states of health - both mental and physical; your Green Card(s) and immigration papers (if applicable).
- Facts about your marriage. When and where did you get married? Did you sign a prenuptial agreement or marriage contract? If so, bring a copy of the agreement with you. Have either of you been married before? Provide details of your previous divorce(s).
- Whether there will be issues involving your children - such as custody or access.
- Financial information. What assets and debts did each of you bring into the marriage? What are your incomes and what are your expenses - jointly and individually? What are the names and addresses of your employers? How much money do both of you have invested: in the bank, the stock market, etc.? Have either of you invested in insurance, a pension plan, a Pension and Profit Savings Plan? What property do you own (a house, car, boat, income property, etc.)? Was the property purchased before or after the marriage? Do you have a mortgage, and if so, how much is owing? Prior to seeing your lawyer, create a budget detailing how much you spend every month on items such as housing, food, clothing, personal grooming, gifts, vacations, etc. If you have children, and expect to be their primary caretaker, make sure you factor their expenses into your budget.
- Legal documents. Bring copies of prior or pending lawsuits, bankruptcy suits, judgments, and garnishments.
- Your divorce goals. Be very specific about your goals in terms of realizing your future; make sure your short-term goals for property, other assets, custody, visitation, and support are consistent with that future.

What your lawyer expects from you

Your lawyer is hoping you'll be the ideal client: calm, businesslike, competent, and well prepared. Ideal clients can control their emotions; are organized; are willing to work with their lawyers to attain their goals; and are willing to listen to their lawyer's advice - even if they don't follow it all the time.

Your lawyer will expect to be paid on-time and in-full. If your financial situation is bad and getting worse, talk to your lawyer immediately; he or she may be able to create some kind of payment plan that works for you. If you're broke because your ex cleaned out the bank account (or did something equally irresponsible), you should tell your lawyer about it right away. He or she can file motions asking the court to grant temporary orders for items such as child or spousal support, custody, control of assets, payment of your lawyer's fees, etc. Temporary orders are meant to ensure that certain things do or don't happen; if you suspect your divorce might get nasty, ask your lawyer about filing orders to protect you and/or your kids - financially and physically.

In *Don't Settle for Less: A Woman's Guide to Getting a Fair Divorce and Custody Settlement* (Doubleday), author and divorce lawyer Beverly Pekala lists five golden rules for being a good client. Here's a synopsis:

Rule 1: Everything is not an emergency; your lawyer is not on call 24 hours a day.

Rule 2: Your lawyer is not a psychologist.

Rule 3: Communicate honestly with your lawyer.

Rule 4: This is not Law & Order - don't expect your lawyer to do something just because you saw it on TV.

Rule 5: Your lawyer didn't create and can't change the system.

According to Pekala, "Failure to follow these rules may result in your lawyer 'firing' you. Just as you can discharge your lawyer, your lawyer can choose to stop representing you and withdraw from your case. This usually happens if you fail to communicate with your lawyer or consistently fail to follow her advice. It may also occur if you cannot or will not pay your bill."

What you should expect from your lawyer

From the day you hire him or her, you and your lawyer should have a clear understanding of what you will need and expect from each other. Ask for a written agreement that details the terms and length of your lawyer-client relationship. If he or she won't provide one, find another lawyer. After learning about your case, your lawyer should create a strategy for your divorce. Be aware that this plan may have to change along the way depending on what your ex and his or her lawyer does.

Your lawyer should clearly explain all your options (again, these may change as your divorce progresses), offer advice regarding the best paths to follow, but respect your wishes if you strongly disagree with a suggested course of action. If you find yourself in constant disagreement with your lawyer, either you've chosen the wrong person to represent you or you're being unreasonable.

Take a close look at your motivations and actions to see if you're refusing your lawyer's advice for purely emotional reasons: for instance, you might be very angry with your spouse, and your lawyer's suggestion doesn't satisfy your desire for vengeance.

Recognize that even a good lawyer will sometimes have bad news for you: that your spouse won't budge on an important issue; that you'll have to give him or her money or other assets; or simply that your expectations are unrealistic, illegal, or not financially feasible.

You should expect your lawyer to return phone calls reasonably promptly (24 hours is reasonable if he/she's not on vacation), and to consult you before taking any major actions concerning your divorce.

You should also expect to feel frustrated or disappointed from time to time as your divorce progresses. Don't take it out on your lawyer! He or she isn't a magician and can't always pull a great solution out of his/her metaphorical hat.

Finally, if you want to ensure that your divorce agreement reflects your goals - and doesn't cost you an arm and a leg - then stay involved with the process, answering your lawyer's requests promptly, honestly, and completely.