Introduction

I have made a special effort to keep this work short and to the point, to allow you to focus on what I think is most important for anyone to know about Working with Aging Clients. While all of us may think we’re pretty good at understanding our clients, there may be many hidden truths we need to bring to the surface when our clients become elders.

If you have not specifically studied aging in your professional or business education, your understanding of aging clients will be limited to a small universe of some clients you have known and perhaps the elders in your own family. That lack of experience can narrow your perspective. It can also cause you to stereotype or make unfounded assumptions that can hurt your client. It can cause you to miss important problems that should inform your actions. I hope to broaden your universe of knowledge about elders to include what those in the aging field, the study of gerontology, and health-care practitioners can share that directly applies to our work.

Aging is becoming more and more of an issue of our time, as longevity has increased dramatically over the past 20 years in particular. What this means is that the number of elders among us is growing, and the proportion of aging persons in our society is shifting upward. As a consequence, most—if not all—of us are going to be serving aging clients. It does not matter what specialty we have or what market we work in, nor whether we are lawyers, business advisors, financial professionals, or others. We are now facing or will soon be facing a rising tide of aging folks among us. Some refer to this as “the silver tsunami.” Some acknowledge it by simply pointing out that we will soon be seeing more walkers and wheelchairs than baby strollers on the streets.

We live in a youth-obsessed culture where older people are often dismissed or marginalized. In the first chapter, I address myths and stereotypes about aging, in the hope that we can see our own biases better. If we get past the
negative mind-set our society thrusts upon us about aging, we are all better off. We can also make smarter decisions, offer better recommendations, and give higher-quality service to our clients when we refrain from making unfounded assumptions about them.

In the second chapter, on challenges, I go through some of the difficulties you can anticipate when Working with Aging Clients. Their sensory impairments, physical limitations, and mobility issues are one part of this. The other big challenge is the cognitive impairment problem; I stress how complex and difficult it can be to understand and address this issue.

The third chapter addresses some of the most common elder-specific issues we see. These include everything from driving and residence choices to loss of financial decision-making ability, financial elder abuse, and caregiving.

The fourth chapter looks at communication with elders. I point out what works best and recommend ways to adapt your communication to your aging client, based on an understanding of effective approaches. My intention in this chapter is to broaden your understanding of the aging person’s mind-set, including the common problem of resistance and how to overcome it.

Chapter 5 tackles the thorny issues of family conflicts about elders. These are common, but few professionals may be looking at these as part of a larger picture—one in which you can be of help. Here I share some examples and show you some ways to work with these problems.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I examine how using tried-and-true conflict resolution techniques can help your aging clients keep their issues from escalating. As an elder mediator myself, I use illustrations to show how you can use mediation, an underutilized resource, to benefit your clients as well as yourself.

Many of my references in this book are to lawyers representing clients. However, I hope that nonlawyers will read this too, with the understanding that much of what applies to lawyers also applies to anyone working with elders. There are universal truths about aging that can work for any professional using this book.