The Relational Practitioner Task Force

By Linda Warren Seely

For many of us who are drawn to the appropriate dispute resolution field, we ‘left’ the legal profession, or more particularly litigation in the legal profession, to seek out a better way of being a lawyer. We wanted something that was more consistent with our values as people but even more importantly as problem solvers for our clients. Most of us want to help our clients find solutions that fit. Legal Scholar and author Julie McFarlane in her book, The New Lawyer, mentions a conversation she had with a taxi driver about being a lawyer attending a conference on problem solving and to her surprise, the taxi driver responds that he never thought of lawyers as problem solvers but problem creators. This attitude towards lawyers, unfortunately, all too often accurately reflects how we are viewed by the general public.

The recent study conducted by the ABA’s National Task Force on Lawyers’ Well-being reveals a soft underbelly of the profession, finding that lawyers have higher rates of alcoholism, drug dependency and depression than found generally, and this trend starts in law school. Martin Seligman, a professor of positive psychology, points out that “Well-being is a combination of feeling good as well as having meaning, good relationships and accomplishment.”

What, you might ask, do relational practices have to do with the ABA Section of Dispute Resolution? One of the keystones to this concept is that every interaction is a negotiation. Improving our ability to negotiate or resolve a conflict from a relational posture can lead to better outcomes, better health and more satisfaction for the clients as well as the practitioner. Being relational offers a path to you, and those with whom you are working, to being happier, healthier and more content.

My hope is that this new taskforce will provide you as the dispute neutral more and better ways of adopting a relational approach to your practice. Being an effective process creator means in part the ability to quickly develop key relationships of trust with those who are entrusting you with their problem. Being relational can help ensure that your emotional intelligence skills are fully honed and primed to make you the best ADR professional you can be while still maintaining your own personal well-being.

Linda Warren Seely began her career as law clerk with Memphis Area Legal Services and then as staff attorney before going into private law practice in Memphis for several years. She served as member of the Madison County Bar Association Board of Directors, President of the Association of Women Attorneys-Anne Schneider Chapter and Seventh District Representative on the Tennessee Bar Association Board of Governors. Linda currently serves in the House of Delegates for the Tennessee Bar Association and was formerly on the Board of Directors for the Association of Women Attorneys Foundation as the President. She is currently the Director of the Dispute Resolution Section of the American Bar Association in Washington D.C. She can be reached at linda.seely@americanbar.org.