Letting Go to Level Up: A Lawyer's Guide

By TANYEE CHEUNG

The legal profession is built on control. From the earliest stages of training, attorneys are taught to anticipate risk, identify weaknesses, and shape outcomes. Precision is expected. Deadlines are unforgiving. Details matter. Success often depends on the ability to foresee what could go wrong and take steps to prevent it. In that sense, control is not only valuable—it is foundational.

But there is a less examined dimension of control that operates beneath the surface of legal work: the effort to control our internal response to events. And unlike external control, which can improve outcomes, internal overcontrol often degrades performance. Many of the inefficiencies in legal practice are not driven by the work itself, but by the friction created in how we react to the work.

Where Energy Is Quietly Lost

Consider a common supervisory scenario. An associate turns in a draft agreement. It is generally solid, but it contains several errors: a defined term used inconsistently, a cross-reference that does not align, a provision carried over from a prior deal without proper adjustment. The reviewing attorney notices the issues and feels a familiar internal reaction—frustration, perhaps disappointment, perhaps concern about reliability.

At that point, two processes unfold simultaneously. The external process—identifying the errors, correcting them, and providing feedback—is necessary and productive. The internal process—the narrative of 'This shouldn't be happening,' 'I thought we went over this,' 'Now I have to spend more time fixing this'—is often neither. Yet the internal process is where a disproportionate amount of energy is spent.

The mistake may take five minutes to fix. The reaction can consume far more.

This dynamic is not limited to supervision. It appears across the full range of legal work—in negotiations when opposing counsel takes an aggressive position, in client demands that arrive late at night marked 'urgent,' in court schedules that shift despite our frustration, and in the self-critique that follows a deposition or client presentation. In each instance, the external issue is real and often requires action. But the internal escalation that follows is frequently optional—and costly.

The Misunderstanding of 'Letting Go'

In a profession that values rigor, the phrase 'letting go' can sound imprecise, or even risky. It may be associated with passivity, lowered standards, or a lack of accountability. That is not what is being proposed here. Letting go does not mean accepting substandard work, ignoring errors, avoiding difficult conversations, or relinquishing professional responsibility.

Instead, it refers to releasing the unproductive internal resistance that attaches to events. A useful distinction can be drawn between action and reaction. Action—correcting the draft, addressing the issue, advising the client, adapting to the changed timeline—is required for effective lawyering. Reaction—the internal narrative of 'This shouldn't have happened'—does not improve outcomes and frequently degrades them. Letting go is the capacity to maintain full engagement with the action while reducing or eliminating the unnecessary reaction.

The Energy Constraint in Legal Practice

Legal work is cognitively intensive. It requires sustained attention, analytical precision, and sound judgment under pressure. These capacities depend on a finite resource: mental energy. When energy is diverted into internal friction—replaying conversations, resisting circumstances, amplifying frustration—less remains available for the work that actually matters.

Reducing internal friction produces tangible performance benefits. Reactive thinking tends to be narrower and more rigid; when frustration or urgency dominates, the ability to evaluate options objectively diminishes.[1] By contrast, when internal resistance is reduced, cognitive bandwidth increases, supporting more nuanced analysis and more strategic decision-making. Associates learn best in environments where feedback is clear, direct, and not emotionally charged. And clients under pressure look to counsel not only for expertise, but for steadiness—an attorney who can respond to challenges without visible internal es-

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calation communicates confidence and control, even in uncertain circumstances.

A Practical Framework: The LET GO Approach

The shift described here does not require a change in personality or temperament. It requires the introduction of a brief pause between stimulus and response. The LET GO framework provides a five-step process that can be applied in real time:

L — Look and Label
Be aware and see if you are "reacting." Label what you are feeling—frustration, irritation, urgency, disappointment. Naming it creates distance from it. Remember you are the one who is looking at the reaction, you are not the reaction and you do not need to become entangled in it. This distinction alone can interrupt the automatic escalation that follows most triggering events.

E — Examine the Facts
Strip away the narrative and identify only what is objectively true. The filing had an error. The closing was delayed. The client sent a late message. Facts require action. Stories require energy. Know which one you are dealing with.

T — Test the Narrative
Ask the one question that cuts through: Does holding onto this thought change the outcome? If the answer is no—and it almost always is—the narrative has no utility. It is not serving you or your client. Set it down.

G — Ground in Reality
What happened, happened. It will not ever un-happen. This is not resignation—it is the most lawyerly move available: accepting the facts as fixed and immovable, and building your next move from there rather than from the story around them. Reality is the only ground worth standing on.

O — Operate with Clarity
Now act. From this grounded, clear-eyed place, address the issue directly, communicate precisely, and move forward. This

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is where your training and judgment shine—unencumbered by the friction that reaction creates.

LET GO in Practice

Consider a negotiation call where you are trying to resolve an issue for your client. The stakes are real, your position is sound, and the outcome matters. In that context, internal friction is not just a personal cost—it is a professional liability. An attorney visibly rattled by opposing counsel's tone, or consumed by the indignity of being interrupted, shifts the dynamic in the room. Composure is credibility. The moment you are seen reacting, you have handed the other side something they did not earn.

A personal example illustrates how quickly this can unfold—and how differently it can end. I was on a call with opposing counsel. After he spoke, I began to respond—and he cut me off. My instinct, honed by years of advocacy, was immediate: Excuse me, can I finish? The frustration was real and, frankly, justified.

But I had recently been practicing loving kindness meditation, which among other things invites you to reflect on moments when you have been kind, when others have been kind to you, when others have not been kind to you—and when you have not been kind to others. That last reflection gave me pause. I have cut people off. Not out of disrespect, but because I thought I understood their point and was trying to move things forward efficiently. The line between impatience and advocacy is thinner than we like to admit.

So I let him speak. He cut me off a second time. When he finished, I simply asked: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Something shifted. Without any accusation or agitation on my part, he heard himself. He apologized—genuinely—and from that point forward, he let me finish. We resolved the issue. I left the call without the residue of frustration that so often lingers after contentious conversations.

That is LET GO in practice. Not passivity. Not surrender. Clarity—about the facts, about my own patterns, and about what actually serves the outcome. Over time, LET GO becomes less a technique you reach for in difficult moments and more a reflex—part of how you show up, for your clients, your colleagues, and yourself.

Conclusion

The legal profession places a premium on the ability to manage complexity, control risk, and produce precise outcomes. These skills are indispensable. But performance is also shaped by how efficiently energy is used. And a significant portion of that energy is often consumed not by the work itself, but by the internal reactions that accompany it.

LET GO allows attorneys to maintain high standards, act decisively, communicate clearly, and conserve the energy required to do so consistently. What happened, happened—and that reality is the only ground worth standing on. In a field where clarity, judgment, and sustained focus define success, reducing internal friction is more than a personal benefit. It is a professional advantage. So the next time you feel that familiar surge of frustration or resistance, remember: LET GO, and level up.

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NOTES

[1] Arnsten, A.F.T. (1998). The biology of being frazzled. Science, 280(5370), 1711–1712. Stress hormones activated during emotional reactivity measurably impair prefrontal cortex function—the region responsible for judgment, planning, and impulse control.

President's Message *Continued from page 6*

Finally, I hope my story also reminds people that often, the traits we struggle with, the ones that can hold us back if left unchecked, are the same ones that have helped us succeed. The wellness goal isn't perfection. It's progress. And that means that even imperfect progress towards improved wellness is something to be celebrated.

NOTES

[1] One of my oldest friends actually suspected I had ADHD much earlier. She's known me since high school, her husband and her daughter have ADHD, and she recognized some of my symptomatology. She's gently steered me in this direction and supported me in figuring this all out over the last couple of years. Love you, Michelle.

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