

What I Wish I Knew Then: Damian Williams

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[Author's note: In past columns, I've asked interviewees to focus on work-related lessons they learned and advice they would like to share with young attorneys. This conversation was no different.

Damian Williams, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, is the first African American to serve in this prestigious role. A child of Jamaican immigrants, Williams earned degrees from Harvard, the University of Cambridge, and Yale Law School before being appointed by President Joe Biden and confirmed in October 2021.

Before joining the SDNY, Williams clerked for Judge Merrick Garland on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit and U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens. Modest and courtly, Williams has nonetheless posted convictions of high-profile defendants such as New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, Sam Bankman-Fried, and U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez. In this interview, he shares insights from his journey and the advice he wishes he had known earlier in his career.]

Early Career at SDNY and Clerkships

Briefly, I came to the SDNY as a 1L summer intern and just really loved the place. It was that simple. I loved the energy. I loved the camaraderie. I loved seeing the AUSAs in court. The whole thing was fascinating to me. I've been part of the SDNY family more or less ever since. Everything that I have done since that internship was with an eye towards coming back here one day as an AUSA.

After I graduated from law school, I clerked for a couple of years. First for Merrick Garland and then



Photo: Ryland West/ALM

U.S. Attorney Damian Williams for the Southern District of New York.

for John Paul Stevens. Both were wonderful, generous human beings, and both had brilliant legal minds. Despite having very different personalities, they were both very modest, very humble bosses. They made me feel like I could participate in discussions with them, even as a brand-new law graduate. I believe the best leaders are those who draw people in rather than push them away. You just want to be around them. Eventually, I worked at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison for a couple of years, where I developed a great number of friends and mentors who helped guide me back to SDNY.

Feedback, a Powerful Management Tool

There are a couple of pieces of advice that I wish I had received earlier in my career. One of them is to

embrace feedback. Don't just accept it when it comes your way, but really seek it out. This is something I learned from my wife, a professor at New York University's Stern School of Business. She was very surprised to hear that in the legal profession, feedback is not a tool lawyers generally use because not everyone can take constructive criticism or appreciate that their critics may be trying to help them. She made me realize that feedback is the best management tool to help people grow. Listening to her, I began to understand that maybe the way we do things in the law could use some improvement, especially in how we manage talent. For example, if you were an athlete and your coach gave you on-the-spot feedback to help you become faster, stronger, and score more points, you wouldn't take that as a sign of rejection. It's a sign of investment. That's the kind of feedback I'm talking about.

Since becoming U.S. attorney, we've really leaned into the notion that we should be delivering and receiving feedback at all levels. Every lawyer working here is a work in progress, including me. I learn something new every day. And I believe AUSAs should be receiving professional development at every level, including the most senior AUSAs. Traditionally, our infrastructure didn't privilege that. Now it does.

Making Mistakes and Learning From Them

Many lawyers come to us from law firms where they were associates. Sometimes, they're surprised by the level of autonomy we give them. Most were outstanding associates; they worked for partners who relied on them and trusted them. But they were still just associates. When you start here, you are a partner. Instead of playing a supporting role, you run your own show. From day one, we expect our new hires to make decisions, show judgment and initiative in solving problems, display confidence in their decisions, and then move on without undue rumination. I wish younger lawyers understood that mistakes aren't a thing that you can avoid. Instead, they need to figure out how they're going to deal with them. Do you ignore the lessons they teach? Or will you embrace the lessons and grow? That, I think, is the bigger and more important question.

Trusting Your Instincts

One of the best pieces of advice I've ever been given is probably to trust my instincts. And that applies to everything. For example, there's no rule book for parenting. From the time you first hold that baby, you're terrified because what are you supposed to do with this child? That's when your instincts kick in. You just do what feels right. Something similar occurs when practicing law here at SDNY. We all have that voice in our head—the one that alerts you when something just feels “off.” Maybe the voice is mistaken. Maybe the voice is telling you to double-check something. But it's always worth paying attention to. When I don't listen to that voice, I tend to find myself making preventable mistakes. And that's when regret kicks in. And regret may be the one thing I fear most in life.

On Mentorship and Leading Full Lives

One thing on mentorship. A fair number of young lawyers sometimes think of mentorship as a burden on one's mentor. But in my experience, that's not the case. If you've chosen the right mentor, he or she will become a willing source of wisdom and take great joy in your success. I tend to keep in touch with numerous young lawyers, most of whom I met well before I became U.S. attorney. My invitation to them is simple: let me know if you ever want to talk or need to talk; I'm always available. Some take me up on that. Some don't. I sometimes worry about those who don't because they may think that mentorship is a burden. But it really isn't.

I encourage people—and I've always done this—to lead full lives. There's no way that I could be as effective at work if I could not find happiness at home. If I didn't think that I was doing well as a father and as a husband, it would make my work less enjoyable. There's no magic formula for achieving work-life balance. But it's worth trying to get right.

I suggest that people find some activity that lets them turn their work brain off. I often find that when I come back to work after doing something that pulls me away mentally, I'm more creative. My mind is firing stronger than it was before I had that little bit of a break. Whether it's exercise, reading a good book, or just watching bad TV, you need something

to give you a bit of a vacation from the serious aspects of the job.

Curating Information and Public Speaking

I try to expose myself to diverse perspectives on all sorts of issues. I actively try to include opinions that I don't necessarily agree with. I don't just consume things that I think I'm going to find appealing. I also explore things that I think I might find upsetting or disagreeable. I keep my mind open to new points of view. In many ways, that's one of the keys to being a good lawyer here at SDNY. We are constantly trying to identify our blind spots and question our assumptions. It's part of the truth-seeking process here. But I think that principle applies outside these walls.

I wish I had learned a bit earlier to accept speaking engagements. Any opportunity to stand up and speak in public is something that you should accept. You may not be thrilled to do it, but doing it again and again makes you better and more comfortable speaking in front of all sorts of audiences. I received that advice as a young lawyer, and I've lived by it until public speaking felt like second nature.

Pet Peeves and Professionalism

I have a few pet peeves. One is timeliness. I like being on time. If I'm late, I feel horrible. To me, being prompt is a sign of respect. I also don't like discourteous behavior in general. So, when people talk over other people or don't respect other people's voices in a room, that deeply upsets me. Or if I hear that someone lost their temper or raised their voice at a colleague, then that will make me want to take corrective action immediately. There is simply no excuse for that kind of behavior. I don't care who you are, or what your title is. We all have an obligation to be good to each other.

Proofreading is another must. Proofread all your stuff, proofread your emails, and make sure they are free of mistakes. Think of it as another courtesy. It's especially important when writing to someone senior to you. As a lawyer, error-free written communications engender trust.

Convicting With Decency and Empathy

I look for common decency in our people. If an applicant is rude to my assistant or anyone associated with this office, then that disqualifies them right off the bat. If you cannot keep your cool, watch your manners, and display common decency, then you're not likely to do well among sleep-deprived people in a stressful environment.

Similarly, I am always skeptical of people who seem to relish sentencing. On a human level, sentencing are serious, solemn proceedings, especially when you're the prosecutor who is advocating for incarceration. Those moments need to be handled with care. SDNY has historically tried to hire young lawyers who understand that. People who are hard-charging but who also combine that with common decency.

The Peaks and Valleys—Overcoming Hardship

I gave a commencement speech in 2023 at Columbia Law School titled "The Mountaintop and the Valley." And a lot of it was about how people tend to assess a career based on the peaks they've climbed and the successes they've achieved. To describe a life like a resume. But viewing a person based on their triumphs—their "mountaintops"—doesn't give us a sense of the dark and often treacherous valleys in between and what we also must traverse. It's in those valleys that we often struggle and learn some of life's hardest but most essential lessons. I would not want your readers to somehow think that I'm a successful lawyer simply because I've accomplished certain things. I am more than just entries on a resume. I genuinely believe that my most important achievements have come about through overcoming hardship. The resilience that I've been able to develop from picking myself up—always with the help of others—is a much more accurate reflection of who I am and what my career has been like. And I believe plenty of successful people would probably say something similar.

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