

As a partner at Morrison & Foerster, former tennis pro Angela Kerek strives to safeguard the physical and mental health of the firm’s employees.

Ms. Kerek, what does tennis have to do with legal advice?

Both have to do with performance, with being better. I want to be a good lawyer, to win in negotiations. Therefore, one easily forgets that it is not a matter of winning everything, but rather about making the important points. The lawyer’s profession, at least as regards the competition and the expected outcome, is just like competitive sports; in many ways it is unhealthy.

How did you notice that?

As young associates, shortly after the financial crisis, we handled an incredible workload. But in everything we achieved, the feeling of success didn’t last long. Like in sports. The problem is: the bad feeling of losing or being worse than others lasts much longer than the good feeling of being successful. When I later became a partner, I felt the same way. In the beginning, I was proud and felt good, but not as good as I always thought I would. I wanted to achieve more growth and measure myself against others. Eventually there came the point at which I asked myself: Do you really want to go on like this or do you need to rethink your goals, re-organise yourself?

You initiated a program in 2019 to improve mental and physical fitness. How do you get lawyers to go along with this?

The younger generation is very open to such activities, and almost demands them. Partners are more difficult to convince. What is important is to initiate the dialogue. That includes open discussions, also about such things as personal failure, illness, depression, or burnout, things that are frequently swept under the rug in the profession of law. After one event, our associates thanked us for the fact that we partners also admitted to making mistakes and not always being perfect. Yet mistakes and failure are precisely those moments that can be so instructive. I can get back up again, in order to become better afterwards. That is what you call resilience.

How did you continue the program during the coronavirus crisis?

Having the entire law firm working at home was new for us. We made daily contact with employees and proposed that they develop new routines, give themselves a structure, and also set boundaries, because at this time the line between work and private life becomes very blurred. Also in our sports offerings, we switched to virtual mode. We broadened our partnership with the Charité University Clinics and invited specialists on coronavirus-specific issues to video conferences. For mental health, the crisis will also certainly result in a lot of long-term good.

How do you mean that?

Now is precisely the time to learn new and healthy routines. To ask yourself whether all trips in the future are necessary or whether the world will really come to an end if I don't answer an email late in that evening, but wait till the next morning instead.

Can the performance led system on which the law firms are based be changed?

Personally, I believe yes, it can, even if it is not easy to stop occasionally and take a breath. Everyone must be prepared to reflect about themselves, to develop better practices in their everyday work. In addition, the law firm must provide a positive environment in which each one can make healthy choices.

Doesn't that, in turn, ultimately fuel the system, if everyone is mentally better and thus also better in performance?

The point is not only to become a better employee per se. That is, of course, very important. But it's about one's own personal balance. It's true that the whole team feels better if I or any individual on the team feels better, and that is better for the clients as well. But unlike in competitive sports, as a rule, we practice this profession 40 years or longer. How can you stay on top so long, if you haven't taken care of yourself?

The interview was conducted by Anika Verfürth.