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Book Review: Raise the Bar: Real World Solutions for a Troubled Profession

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Raise the Bar: Real World Solutions for a Troubled Profession


Reviewed by
Rebecca K. Blumberg

Raise the Bar: Real World Solutions for a Troubled Profession is a collection of essays about what is wrong with the legal profession and how lawyers should fix it. The book is the result of the ABA’s 2007 Raise the Bar project. The authors’ mission was to “write about solutions our profession can embrace.”

Before offering solutions, the essayists frame the problem. Lawyers today are unhappy – unhappier than lawyers have been in previous generations. The authors argue that because law has changed from a profession to a business, lawyers are too motivated by profits and not sufficiently motivated by justice. As a result, lawyers sacrifice their personal well-being for the sake of their law practices, forego important pro bono work, neglect to mentor other lawyers, fail to develop a broad range of important skills, and generally lose a sense of pride and self-satisfaction in their work.

Times have changed since 2007. Given the miserable economy, lawyer layoffs, and the dearth of legal positions, it is easy to view Raise the Bar as less relevant today. Worrying about the ill effects of being overworked seems almost quaint compared to worrying about lack of work and financial ruin. But Raise the Bar has some interesting ideas for improving the profession. Perhaps a time when firms, businesses, and government agencies are in transition is one of the best times to think about ways to change the profession for the better.

The first few essays in Raise the Bar focus primarily on the way law firms are organized and leveraged and on compensation and promotion structures in firms. Essayists contemplate firms that abolish billable-hour goals, create internal reward systems for developing core professional values, and operate with great transparency with respect to how partnership is achieved. In later essays, authors explore how professionalism could be strengthened through apprenticeships, mentoring, and outreach to new lawyers and law students.

The book becomes inspiring in the final essays on lawyers, professionalism, and pro bono work. The authors argue that pro bono experiences lead to deeper job satisfaction and increased skill development for lawyers while at the same time helping more people achieve access to justice. These final chapters explore the ideals and virtues that underlie the legal profession and question what it means to serve others as a professional.

Raise the Bar is an ambitious book and a good read. Most readers will disagree with at least some of the proffered solutions to unhappiness in the legal profession, but contemplating the value of the solutions is what makes the book thought-provoking.

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