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## Criminal Law

# Approachability makes for good client relationships: Goldlist

By Peter Small, AdvocateDaily.com Contributor

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One of the keys to being a good defence lawyer is being approachable to clients, says Toronto defence lawyer [Jordana Goldlist](#).

"It's important for a client to feel comfortable being open and honest with their lawyer," says Goldlist, principal of [JHG Criminal Law](#).

"It's also important from a lawyer's perspective to gain the information they need in order to wage a proper defence," Goldlist tells [AdvocateDaily.com](#). "If they feel judged, potentially, for their conduct or lifestyle, I think they're often reluctant to speak openly."

Goldlist believes clients find her approachable, which she attributes largely to having an open mind.

"I don't judge my clients for the decisions they've made in life. I don't judge them as people. I treat them with respect, the same respect that I would anticipate receiving," she says.

Many lawyers don't do that, seeing themselves as somehow superior to their clients, Goldlist says.

"If you start from that frame of mind, then, of course, you're not approachable because that energy and that impression radiates," she says.

She recalls overhearing two lawyers complaining about their clients. One said he never knew what mood his mental health client would be in. The other said she hates representing "junkies" because they phone at all hours of the night.

"If that's how you're going to speak about the people that you're supposed to be representing, firstly, you shouldn't be representing them," says Goldlist. "And secondly, if you don't want late-night calls from clients, maybe you should consider a different career. The reality is many people are arrested during the night."

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Goldlist's clients understand they can call her in the middle of the night, if it is critical she says. "If they're calling me at 2 o'clock in the morning I know it really is urgent, and so I take the call."

If you refer to your clients in a demeaning fashion, you are doing a disservice not only to them but to your own professional obligations, she adds.

"Don't judge your client. Don't assume that the allegations are correct. Don't assume they don't have a defence," she says. "These are all the things I've heard from clients over the years who have told me what they didn't like about their previous lawyers."

Goldlist says she actually cares about what happens to her clients and what led them to be charged.

"You have someone charged with an armed robbery, for example. How do I know what circumstances in their life put them in a position to be charged with that? And it may be a false accusation," she says.

Everyone has a story, Goldlist says. "I've always been curious to know what that story is. And I'm not going to know what it is if I immediately put them on the defensive."

Don't pry or ask a client outright about their life history, she says.

"But as you start asking questions, starting from, 'What are you doing here in the jail?' you start learning more and more about the person and you start earning their trust," Goldlist says.

That trust leads to the all-important mutual respect.

"I don't spend a great deal of time thinking about how I should interact with my clients," she says. "But I interact with them in the same way that I would interact with anyone, and that to me is important."

Goldlist says her personal experience as a homeless street youth gives her an understanding of how circumstances can affect an individual's life.

"I know that there's more to a person than the current situation that they're faced with. If someone was going to judge me for the worst moments of my life and the worst decisions I've made, I'd be in trouble," Goldlist says.

Sometimes getting to know her clients helps her in unexpected ways during cross-examinations, she says.

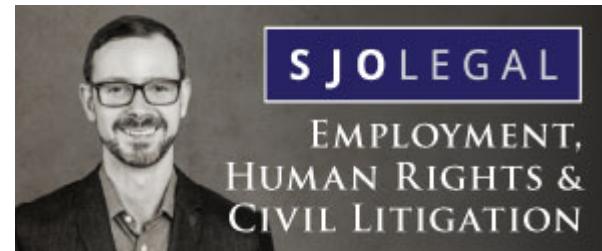
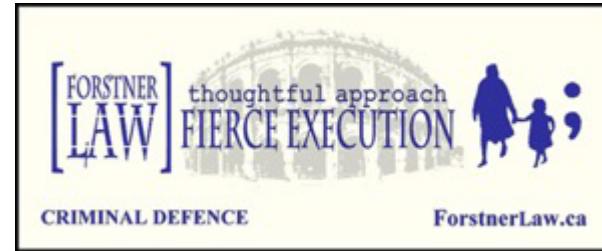
Goldlist recalls how one client told her, as she got to know him, that he is very particular about his manner of dress.

"It was something I was able to draw into a cross-examination, and it mattered in this case that was primarily about identification," she says. "Manner of dress was relevant."

For young lawyers, approachability has the added benefit of helping them build their practice, Goldlist says.

"Clients who actually connect with a lawyer will care about that lawyer's practice and they will often refer other clients and speak positively about them," she says.

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