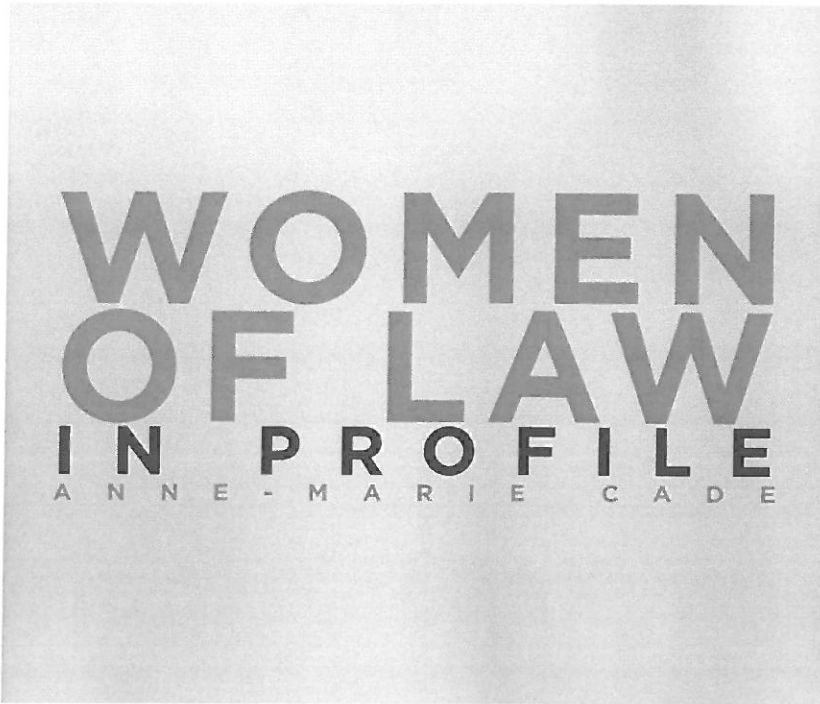


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ANNE-MARIE CADE, FAMILY DISPUTE RESOLUTION PRACTITIONER, TELLS US HOW SHE RE-FRAMED HER APPROACH TO THE LAW

May 17, 2018



AUTHOR: LIBBY HAKIM

Anne-Marie Cade, Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner and Lawyer, last year took home the Women in Law Thought Leader of the Year award. She says the biggest mistake she made when starting out was doing everything that lawyers traditionally do.

Here, she tells us how she re-framed her approach to the law, and continues to do things a little differently.

Crowd & Co: Congratulations on being recognised as a thought leader. Can you tell us about what you do and what it meant to win that award?

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clients, there's no winner and loser. You've just got to reach a compromise at the end of the day and so clients understand that they need to be looking at the needs and goals of their family going forward.

What I really do is empower them. I work with clients to empower them to reach a peaceful, amicable separation, and stay out of the family court. I feel that approach has a positive outcome for families.

If you talk to someone going through a divorce and they say, "Oh, I've got to see a lawyer," it almost comes from a sense of fear. It's something they have to do but they don't really want to do it. I try to humanise the law by talking to clients about how they are coping and show them that I empathise and understand them and am not just giving them legal information. I talk to them about adopting gratitude practices, about being mindful, about living in the moment, because I've done a lot of work in that space.

I tell them to "slow down. Just take it easy. Unless you have very, very pressing problems, financial needs, or there's abuse or something like that, you need to just take it slow." That's so important because what they will do today is very different to what they would do three months down the track when they are feeling less stressed and less emotional. That is my main point of differentiation. I think that was what actually won me that award.

C&Co: Can you tell me more about why you've taken this approach to family law?

AMC: My training is as a lawyer, but I have a personal story as well because I went through a marriage breakdown. I was married for a very long time. When my marriage ended, I felt like the world was coming to an end. I had to do a lot of work on myself and I used a lot of mindfulness practices to bring myself back to the present moment and start reframing my thinking. I used a lot of gratitude practices in my daily living, looking to be thankful for what I have got rather than looking for the negative and trying to blame somebody else for what has happened. Because at the end of the day, we've got to take responsibility for what has happened, and I think that approach that I took really helped me.

I can relate to how clients are feeling and what they are doing. I tell them I know. A marriage breakdown has huge implications, traumatic implications for people. The emotional needs of clients must be addressed. I think I am very well-positioned to do that because I have the personal experience and I have the legal knowledge as well.

C&Co: How have you reached out to people to become known as a thought leader?

AMC: Much of the legal system is based on old values and concerns of the past. The procedures were designed by people who lived in a different era. The law is constantly looking backwards at precedents, so things don't change too fast.

We now live in an age where reorganisation is required towards new ways of problem solving, and lawyers need to think more intuitively and in an inclusive way to better serve client's needs.

Our legal system and culture can create or exacerbate conflict. The collaborative approach that I adopt, steering clients towards mediation, is an excellent starting point. I have started shifting the thinking of my clients to cultivate conversations of resolution with their partners and reframe how they look at their problems as opposed to resorting to adversarial debates. I work with them to empower them to reach a decision that will work for their family going forward.

Also, I leverage technology to build efficiencies into the way I deliver these services to my clients. Lawyers are very averse to social media, because lawyers often don't reveal who they are as a real person. There's a barrier. What I try to do is I portray to clients that I'm human as well. That approach I think is so important, especially in this day and age, because millennials connect to that. They're living their life out on social media. They need to know that the lawyer they're talking to, or the person they're talking to, understands their needs and understands where they're coming from. I think that approach that I take helps break down the barriers and that's what draws them to me.

C&Co: Our [recent client survey results \(women-of-law-future-profession-survey-results\)](#) indicated that half of respondents think client expectations will be the biggest challenge in the future for lawyers. How do you think client expectations have changed over the last few years?

AMC: What I feel is that clients need better access to legal services and this is not just in the area of family law. It's across the board. They need it quick, fast. They need it on their mobile device. Younger generations are looking for it in this on-demand economy. They don't have the patience to make an appointment and wait for the lawyer to see them in two weeks. They expect their lawyers to have new skill sets, not just know the legal principles. Lawyers need to be more relational in their approach and in their interactions with clients. We can't expect to treat clients like faceless transactions but rather clients must feel a connection to their lawyer. Clients are looking for lawyers who can make their lives better, take on their problems and find the solutions.

What I do is I try and use technology to facilitate that conversation. That's what I do with my Instagram and Facebook, and with my blogs. So, before they come to see me, people know about me. That's from the image that I portray of myself and they know, "Okay, this is a human." It's that difference between the human and the lawyer.

I get a lot of enquiries through social media, and also people who call and tell me, "Look, I've read your blog. I'd like to work with you." I leverage technology to facilitate access to legal services. Robots can't ever do what lawyers do but lawyers are doing what robots can do. I leave the paperwork, the mundane tasks, the email automation, all of that is where we leverage technology. With what I do, technology actually puts lawyers in front of clients and helps clients build trust in their lawyer.

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AMC: With regards to my career, I've actually had a pretty interesting journey. I was a lawyer in Sri Lanka, and worked in the area of wills and property and a little bit of commercial law. I moved to Australia about 15 years ago with a little baby. I had to re-qualify as a lawyer in Australia.

I worked in a law firm for about six or 12 months. Then I decided I wanted to work for myself, so I decided to take the plunge and basically started a law practice at my kitchen table. I had friends who would ask me for legal advice on an ad hoc basis and I thought, "Yeah, I could make a business of this." It grew from there.

In the course of practising I encountered a lot of clients who were very dissatisfied with the approach of family lawyers and how costly it was. I decided to explore that space and see what difference I could make in that area. Then I did my training as a mediator and felt that this was the path I wanted to follow and literally built my team from scratch.

I found that the work I was doing in the family law space was very, very challenging and that was where I wanted to be. I don't act in the capacity of a lawyer at DivorceRight. I leave the legal work to the lawyers and I work in the capacity of a mediator. As a mediator, I can work with both parties. I think my strengths are negotiation and that empathetic approach, which is really useful when it comes to mediation.

We work as a team with the collaboration model that I adopt. I find this is so useful because I can bring in whatever services I require, depending on each client's requirements. I have some family lawyers I work with, along with financial planners, accountants, and psychologists. I've worked with divorce coaches. It just depends on the client and what I do is I bring the team together. I initially sit with the clients and do a strategy session with them. I work as a divorce advisor, giving them legal information and telling them why they should be following this approach rather than seeing a lawyer as soon as they have a problem.

C&Co: What was the biggest challenge in going out on your own?

AMC: I think the biggest challenge was initially I was that stereotypical lawyer. I started the law firm and did everything that a lawyer in traditional practice does. Then I found that my clients wanted more. They wanted that online approach. This is going back probably five, six years ago. I found that I wanted to adopt that approach but the legal profession is very highly regulated. I found that that was a battle I had to win with regulators and working around regulations. But having said that, I find that it's much better now because more people are doing what I was doing at the time, offering online legal services. Regulators really need to catch up with what's good for the client and the consumer. It's important to meet the consumer where they are. Access to justice is a huge problem. There are people crying out for legal services and it's just too costly. It's lawyers who can make that available and use technology to do that.

C&Co: Finally, is there one piece of career advice that you've been given that has stuck with you?

AMC: Actually, my aunt, who brought me up, instilled that notion of hard work pays off and perseverance. Someone asked me the question the other day, "What do you geek out on?" I kind of thought about it and I think it's work, because I love what I do. I really enjoy it. I'm passionate about what I do. I think that's very important. You've got to find your purpose. You've got to find your why, why you do what you do. If you find your why and you work around that, you will not work a day in your life because you're doing what you love every day.

Another thing I find that's very important is that you've got to surround yourself not just with lawyers but with other professionals. People from other professions add so much value. They have so many experiences. Lawyers are not really trained in how to run a business. We get all that information from the tribe that we build. Build your own tribe and bring in mentors. That is so important I feel, to succeed. You can't do it on your own. You have to build a tribe.

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