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PERSPECTIVE

Studying for the bar? Be a sheep

By Rebecca Ann Simon

The California bar exam is a beast: 18 hours of grueling testing over three consecutive days covering 13 doctrinal topics. California's is generally regarded as the most difficult bar exam in the nation. The pass rate for the July 2014 exam was a dismal 48.6 percent. With each administration of the bar exam, invariably, some students at the top of their classes fail to pass. But it is not lack of intellect that trips them up. It's attitude. Here are five strategies for those getting ready to tackle the bar next month:

Be a Sheep

Most students will (and should) use a bar prep company. The single best piece of advice I ever received on bar prep: be a sheep. Get in line and do the work as outlined by your bar program. Do not question the method; do not fight the process.

Sheep in a flock will follow a leader and are not rebellious. This is anathema to most law students. Studies show most attorneys-in-training are Type-A personalities in law school because they like to argue, assert their opinion, and, let's face it, be right all the time. This serves them well in their practice, but the cruel irony of bar prep is that the mentality needed for success on the bar exam is the opposite of what makes a person successful in the practice of law.

Professor Natalie Rodriguez, co-director of the Academic Support and Bar-Related Programs at Southwestern Law School, suggests "when you sign-up for bar preparation, you have to just trust the method. It is usually the students who accept the recommended course of study without com-

plaint that are passing."

As part of a flock, you cannot argue with the process or assert your own views. You must just get in line and do the work. The bar prep company probably has decades of experience getting students ready for the exam. For the first, and likely last, time in your life, be a sheep.

Cultivate a Growth Mindset

Mindset is a simple idea discovered by Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck. According to Dweck, a "growth mindset" is where you believe your intelligence can be developed. Those in a growth mindset thrive on a challenge and see failures as a springboard for stretching their existing abilities.

This is a key concept for bar prep because there will be days when you hit a wall. The subject matter will seem dense and impenetrable. It may feel like you never studied the subject in law school. It is possible you did not even take a class in a subject, like community property or remedies — electives at most law schools but subjects on the exam.

Having a growth mindset, the belief you can master these subjects during this intensive preparation period, will allow you to absorb the material efficiently.

Get Gritty

Angela Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania studies "grit," a quality that enables individuals to work hard and stick to their long-term passions and goals. This is related to mindset because one thing that makes you gritty is having a growth mindset. According to Duckworth, the attitude "I can get better if I try harder" should help make you a tenacious, determined, hard-working

person.

While studying for the bar, roll up your sleeves and get gritty. If need be, "fake it until you make it." Tell yourself every day you can do it. Believe the positive messages you tell yourself daily. Self-doubt and lack of self-confidence will sink you. Get gritty and you can succeed.

Have a Solid Routine

"Routines are like mental butlers," says Michael McCullough, a professor of psychology at the University of Miami. "Once you have a routine in place, then the mental processes that make the behavior happen take place automatically."

During bar prep, reserve your energy for the study and memorization of legal concepts. Having to put mental thought into meals, commuting, bedtime, laundry or any other day-to-day activities is wasted energy. Get yourself into the same regimen every day and you will save time and mental energy. Get up at the same time. Study during the same hours. Have meals during the same hours. Go to bed at the same time.

Be a bar study machine. Getting on a regular schedule will help stress go down. When stress goes down, mental agility goes up. You need mental agility during bar prep.

Visualize Game Day Everyday

Many athletes use visualization techniques in training. Sports psychologist Dr. Jeff Simons of CSU East Bay urges athletes to "imagine competing, getting in their own groove, feeling it, tasting it, reminding them of that feeling of flow." Olympic sprinter Michael Johnson, one of the fastest men on earth, told Time magazine he uses visualization to his advantage: He

visualizes the upcoming race, concentrating on the start, the weakest part of his race, and thinking about himself shooting off the blocks like a bullet.

The bar exam is not an athletic event, but it is a mental event of epic proportion. It takes similar discipline, focus and mental fortitude to pass the bar as it does to win a race. Approach the bar exam like a mental race to the finish and use a visualization technique to help you perform on game day. Prepare every day for sitting in that exam hall on game day, visualize how you will begin the first essay, imagine feeling strong, tackling the multiple choice, and finally finishing the performance test. By doing this, you will get yourself into that "feeling of flow" in order to cross the finish line and pass.

It comes down to employing the above strategies to achieve the right bar prep attitude. If you have earned your J.D., you have the intellect to pass the bar. No doubt about it. This is about attitude over intellect. You cannot just be smart enough to pass. You cannot just work hard and expect to pass. You must work smart. This includes keeping up the right attitude every day of the process. It is achievable.

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Angeles. Simon passed the bar on her first try and credits her achievement to the Southwestern Custom Bar Prep course that teaches the above strategies.



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