



## **Positively Legal: What Spider-Man Can Teach Us About Positivity, Humor, and Teamwork**

**Skills and Professional Development**



*Spoiler alert for those who haven't watched Spider-Man No Way Home!*

As in-house counsel, we are expected to show good judgment, be the business' moral compass, and quickly solve problems while successfully managing stakeholders. With so many teams working remotely, it is more important than ever to find ways to keep us feeling connected and fulfilled, while adding value to the business.

I think [Spider-Man](#) in [Spider-Man No Way Home](#) has a lot to teach us about teamwork and the importance of positivity and humor in the face of dire circumstances.

## **With great power comes great... service**

Aunt May's quote (previously Uncle Ben's and an age-old adage), "With great power comes great responsibility," exemplifies the shared experience of our three multiverse Spider-Men.

A common responsibility (and sometimes burden) of an in-house leader is how to best guide a team of lawyers with different strengths and challenges to bring out the best in them — while successfully supporting the company by preventing any issues from becoming serious or getting out of control.

Thuy Sindell and Milo Sindell in "[The Golden Rule of Leadership](#)" stated, "Leaders who understand that leading others is a privilege understand that leading, first and foremost, is about service." Leaders "are charged with great responsibility" to "direct, shape and focus the potential of people to a specific result."

They also suggested the following principles on leading from a place of privilege:

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- **Respect.** Earn it.
  - **Humility.** Get used to it and learn from others.
  - **Service.** Put others first in defining how you lead and fulfill your role.
  - **Gratitude.** Be thankful for the role that you are in and share gratitude with your team.
  - **Humor.** Find it. As a leader, you need to be able to laugh at yourself, find the “funny” in rough situations, and help others do the same.

## Don't underestimate humor as a superpower

Whatever the situation, Spider-Man is never short of a witticism and often uses it to diffuse serious situations. This [positive emotion](#) ensures Spider-Man remains a [divergent thinker](#), allowing him to solve problems in more creative ways while also taking more calculated risks.

Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas described humor as a superpower in, [Humour Seriously](#) and [Don't Stop Us Now](#). They argued that “viewing our mistakes through a comic lens can have a meaningful impact on our psychology.” They describe Warren Buffet, who projects a “guy next door” kind of image as a “classic example of a leader whose sincere style of self-deprecating humor” was described by *Forbes* as “his underappreciated superpower.”

Keeping positive and finding humor in what can feel like constant stress and obstacles goes a long way to ensuring your team make good decisions and develop strong relationships across the business.

## Learn to divide and conquer as a team

The first time our three Spider-Men try defeating five super-villains on the Statue of Liberty, they fail spectacularly. Unable to work together, they unsuccessfully attempt to deal with all the supervillains simultaneously, doing little more than exerting a lot of effort for little reward.

They are only successful after Tom Holland's Spider-Man explains how he worked with the other Avengers. They realize they need to focus on defeating one supervillain at a time, but they also take small actions to put the others on hold until they can go back to them.

With many people working from home, leaders need to help individuals feel connected to their team, work together, and understand business priorities so their efforts and energy are used to their greatest effect.

This includes identifying the low risk/low value work that may be taking up too much time. We need to help our teams learn to manage competing, high risk/high value work so that they can keep smaller projects moving while focusing greater effort on a larger goal.

[Team meetings](#) and regular one-on-ones are great ways to share knowledge as well as establish priorities.

## Emotions are contagious

In the movie, MJ repeatedly says, “If you expect disappointment, you'll never be disappointed.” But negative thinking can spread through the team. By addressing this early and encouraging positive practices, team members will be more open to problem solving and happier generally.

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[Shawn Achor](#), in “[Positive Intelligence](#)” states, “Training your brain to be positive is not so different from training your muscles at the gym [...] Engaging in one brief positive exercise every day for as little as three weeks can have a lasting impact.”

These positive practices can include:

- Expressing [gratitude](#) (extensively researched by [Robert Emmons](#)) about team members during meetings.
- Encouraging [curiosity](#) (well researched by [Todd Kashdan](#)) in the legal team about the business and the broader context of their work. Like Spider-Man himself, constant curiosity increases enjoyment and lateral thinking.
- Noticing if team members are reluctant to share or if they think their work (and/or their abilities) are less than others. Andrew Garfield’s Spider-Man felt less than the others in part because he thought his villains were less interesting. It took Tobey Maguire’s Spider-Man to remind him that he was “amazing” as a person to help him regain his self-confidence.

[Adam Grant](#) noted, “If you judge your worth by your achievements, you feel worthless whenever you fall short of a goal. Stable self-confidence comes from learning to separate your performance from your self-esteem. [Excellence is a reflection of effort, skill and luck – not your value as a person.](#)”

## Follow your Spidey senses

As in-house counsel, we are often overwhelmed. Our small teams are stretched beyond capacity with seemingly never-ending work; we experience pressure to be experts on a wide range of topics; and we must pivot quickly to keep up with the business.

When we feel this way, let’s take a moment to rely on our Spidey senses and start building positivity and humor into our leadership and teamwork.

These tools are an excellent place to start building positive practices into your team this year:

- [Relativity4](#) ([Positive Practices Toolkit/Flow](#));
- [14-day Mindful Billable Unit Bootcamp](#); and
- [The Positive Lawyer Coaching Program](#).

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Caterina Cavallaro is associate general counsel at VGW.

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In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.