

# Order beyond the court

## Focus on civility among attorneys sends a message

The world around us changes so rapidly that too often our actions go unchecked, tempers are lost, fits are thrown and epithets are hurled, all causing more harm than good — not to mention being utterly unpersuasive.

Technology influences how we communicate — in haste. The drive to win overcomes our appreciation for the talents or experience of others. Being pushed to the brink leads us to sometimes indulge in such erratic behavior that our basic, good intentions are nullified.

Whether it's in response to what's being played out in Congress, on the athletic fields or in public forums where the opin-

ions of others differ from ours, more than ever we are hearing reminders telling us to straighten up, to show respect. To be civil.

Those practicing in the field of law, which is either revered as a noble calling or ridiculed, are not shielded by the behavioral changes in society. Yet Monday's ruling by the Florida Supreme Court to amend the Oath of Attorney to include wording about character is as unexpected as it is profound.

The seven-paragraph oath now includes: "To opposing parties and their counsel, I pledge fairness, integrity, and civility, not only in court, but also in written and oral communications."

The change in the oath, which is recited by every new member of the Florida Bar, takes effect immediately.

The court recognized the growing consensus across the country to require a pledge of civility and professionalism, given increased concern about incivility among attorneys. A civility pledge is now part of the oath of attorneys in South Carolina, Utah and New Mexico among other states.

The American Board of Trial Advocates, a 53-year-old trial lawyers organization, has been working for years to address the issue of attorney character as it attempts to improve the impression of the profession. Its Code of Professionalism includes a

pledge "to be respectful in my conduct toward my adversaries."

"What we're finding is that it's really a matter of awareness, especially among young lawyers coming out of law school," said veteran Jacksonville attorney Robert Cole, immediate past president of the Florida Board of Trial Advocates. "It's something that we've been working with the Supreme Court and the Florida Bar for a matter of years. We think it's a great thing."

While the Supreme Court action is directed to attorneys, we all would be better citizens if we took a quiet oath to treat others with respect and decency, even if their beliefs are the opposite of ours.