

Definitely Mabey

Getting a Seat at the Table

I fear that the perceived need for a seat at the law firm's management table has become so all consuming that its true meaning has been lost to many of its pursuers.



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It has seemed to become the proverbial destination rather than another milestone in a rich and rewarding career. Its achievement often results in a less-than-anticipated sense of fulfillment.

I recognize that it is easy to be casual about a seat at the table when you are seen to have one.

Instead of waxing on the challenges and tribulations of being at the table — because it really frequently becomes the definition of “be careful of what you wish for” — this column addresses conduct that you might follow to be asked to take a seat at the table (trusted adviser) versus pursuing one (contender).

As always, I start with the caveat that none of the points you will read are rocket science, otherwise someone else would be writing this column, but rather they are just plain common sense.

The foregoing disclaimer is the perfect segue into the first point I would make: never let your intelligence overtake your common sense. Clients pay for judgment whether they are internal or external, so use it.

All firms are filled with very bright individuals and while smarts are admired, hard work is the real shrine at which most firms worship. Be a doer as well as a thinker and get your hands dirty — pick up the piece of paper on the lobby floor rather than pointing it out to a staff member to handle. It won't go unnoticed by clients, staff, and lawyers alike.

While many don't see the practice of law as a team sport, there is more to be gained by playing to your colleagues' strength than their weaknesses. Others' success will beget your success.

While client base and financial success are often prerequisites for consideration for admission to many a firm's table, “firm mindedness” will ensure selection. Table members must be seen to always (instinctively, not forced) be putting the firm's interests ahead of their own goals and personal gain. This is true, whether it is a staff member or lawyer seeking admission.

Recognize wisdom, irrespective of its source and timing, and always be seen to support the right course of action not simply the popular one. The hard part will always be taking it. Don't be afraid to be in the minority and at the same time, admit and change your mind when you are wrong.

There would be few environments where the old axiom “take care of little things and the big things will take care of themselves” is truer. Attention to detail in everything you do is a highly valued attribute.

Praise others profusely. Nobody truly dislikes being singled out for their successes and will often gravitate (like clients) to, and be supportive of, those that make them feel good. On the other hand, blaming others for all your failures wears thin with everyone.

Treat everyone with dignity and respect: clients, staff, and lawyers alike. This approach is perhaps most important when peers and non-peers are not reciprocating in nature. To be an effective member of the management team, you have to be able to, and be seen to, rise above the fray.

You must be seen to be patient, calm, and consistent but not indecisive in your dealings with all. Anger used in small doses at appropriate moments conveys passion, concern, and commitment. But the constant spewing of venom will simply reinforce your self-inflicted reputation as a bully and an asshole.

Younger lawyers and senior staff should never let their vacations get out of cycle with those of the partners. Being there when they need you most (when they are away from the office) is a quick way to not only gain a work source but also be seen to be in synch with the value placed on working hard.

More often than not, failure to achieve a seat is due to a breakdown in self-discipline. People become distracted by what others have and how others operate, losing sight of what they set out to achieve.

Be an active listener with the ability to separate the chaff from the wheat. A great deal of the crises found in law firms are the result of people not listening to and taking seriously the “whispers” and then having to react to the screams. Stephen Covey said it best when he wrote “seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

Scorecards are important in sports but not so much in law firms. You should always vigorously pursue what you believe but demonstrate graciousness in both victory and defeat of your positions. People will remember how you conducted yourself long after they have forgotten about the issue.

Be able to discern the difference between a firm expense and a personal investment in your future. Look to the firm to reimburse the former but step up personally for the latter and the dividend will be respect among other things. Money is a lousy way of keeping score!

While the axiom “measure twice, cut once” is true in law firms, the importance of making the cut (action) is very critical. Be decisive, as falling victim to the teeter-totter syndrome has caused much disenchantment in firms and resulted in senior staff and lawyers falling short of their goal.

Attitude is a daily choice and good or bad it can be contagious. Make yours a life-altering one that folks want to emulate.

Laugh out loud and often not only because it will ease tensions and make others feel good but it will feel good and heighten the creativity you bring to bear on solving challenges the firm and you face. People will gravitate towards and seek advice from creative problem solvers.

Like most organizations, many senior staff and lawyers strive to live on the top of the mountain so to speak but when they get there, many are confronted with the truth that the happiness and growth they experienced occurred on the climb to the top.

Until next month remember the old proverb:

"No matter how far you have gone on the wrong road, turn back."

Comments or Questions?

*First Published in **Canadian Lawyer**
October 2010*



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