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The Road to Partnership Is Paved With Discipline

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If you're an associate attorney employed by a private partnership, you have two jobs instead of one. First, as a beginning lawyer, you need to gain knowledge and skills to effectively complete tasks to exceed the expectations of supervising partners as well as clients. Initially, you may believe this is the most important task-at-hand deserving all your time and energy. But if you've been working for a few years, you've probably noticed the ability to sell and acquire new business could be even more important to your long-term career trajectory.

This insight may come as a surprise to some and it certainly wasn't discussed much in law school. It can be daunting, and maybe you're feeling overwhelmed, if you had wanted to be a salesperson, you would have chosen a different career. But you chose to be a lawyer and you've done everything right so far to secure your future. You studied hard, got through law school, passed your exams with flying colors and figured partnership was just one more step in the process. But when you learn it's not so simple, what do you do?

Don't panic. Even if you were drawn to your profession because you like research or complex problem-solving and would much prefer sitting in front of your computer strategizing how to develop a winning legal argument or structure a complex deal to attending a networking event making small talk with strangers, there are plenty of things you can do now to pave your path to partnership. Just like the process you adopted to obtain your JD distinction, you need to develop a plan for upward movement and stay the course.

Distinguishing Work from Career

Both rainmakers and highly dependable time billers understand the concept of discipline. However, rainmakers are able to take control of their destiny by looking up from the work and applying discipline to essential issues that have an impact on their careers. It is important to provide clients with quality work. But quality work alone will not propel your career in today's competitive environment. To be successful, lawyers must make a paradigm shift from being reactive workers to becoming proactive problem solvers, even anticipating what a client's next big challenge will be. Associates hoping to be invited into a partnership must not only create value for the firm and the firm's clients, they must communicate this value to decision makers. This requires creativity but, even more importantly, it will demand discipline.

Start with Understanding the Client's Operations

You may be thinking that you have two insurmountable obstacles. First, you're somewhat of an introvert with no sales training and second, you don't have time for anything but your legal work. A little bit of discipline will go a long way in overcoming these stumbling blocks. Let's examine the time hindrance first. The essence of any good business development plan takes into account the client's issues and business imperatives. By dedicating just one afternoon to studying the client's operations and current legal liabilities, you can simultaneously improve your understanding of the client and offer suggestions to your supervisor on how to improve service. If the client is a public company, start with a review of their 10-k. Hopefully your firm has internal billing numbers for recording time for such activities. If not, don't let that stop you. Always approach your work with curiosity and creativity. Don't be afraid to share thoughts and ideas with the partners-in-charge and suggest ways to help the client. You may discover needed services that other clients in similar industries could leverage. Now you're on your way to creating value and expanding existing relationships.

Baby Steps toward Rainmaker Status

And what about the fact that selling does not come naturally to you? There are many things you can do now to assist your practice group leaders in marketing services that do not include going to events and meeting strangers. Eventually, as you gain more confidence in what you bring to the table, you may find that you want to start attending events—even presenting at conferences—because you have stories to tell and solutions to offer. But if you can't yet imagine that scenario, start small. Dedicate three hours a week to business development and write down every task and the amount of time you spend on each. Initially, you can use this time to learn about sales techniques or your own firm's marketing and business development process. Not only will you gain knowledge, you'll be showing firm leadership your interest in helping to grow revenues.

Here are a few ideas:

- Each day, read your firm's intranet postings about recent wins or opportunities. (Your firm doesn't have such information available? Ask your favorite practice group leader if you can generate a list of the groups' recent wins/success to share with others in the firm.) Knowing how the firm is growing is a first step in understanding how business development works.
- Ask your marketing department if you can read a proposal or pitch deck recently used to win business. Ask how the opportunity came about and who the competition was.
- Find out if your practice group tracks referral sources and offer to help create such a process if none exits.
- Offer to help your practice group leader prepare a presentation to educate others in the firm about a service your group offers. This could start a healthy conversation about other clients needing support and could nudge doors open for cross-selling.
- Write down the three top concerns your current client(s) should have regarding their business and/or industry along with solutions for these concerns, listing the monetary or risk-mitigating benefits of each.
- Set up Google news alerts for your practice group's top clients and prospects and circulate relevant articles to the group as they become available.
- Offer to work on content for a brochure about a special service your practice group is or should be offering.
- Ask someone in marketing for a short tutorial to understand your firm's client relationship management tool.
- Volunteer to develop a spreadsheet capturing website information about your firm's, or practice group's, top five competitors and determine if competitors are offering services your firm is not or have positioned themselves as leaders in an area where your firm is equally strong.
- Offer to co-author a thought leadership piece for your favorite partner, covering a relevant industry issue.

Even if you aren't ready to approach clients with information about yourself, your firm and/or practice group, your supervisors may be able to leverage your assistance in creating a target list of C-suite executives they should meet. You can collect data on schools these prospects attended as well as charities or associations they play a key role in and determine if there are any firm members or referral sources that could make introductions.

Establishing Good Habits Early

There are many simple and easy tasks you can take on to start your journey towards partnership. But you can't get lazy. You can't let days go by without having done something. Initially, adopting the three hour per week plan will reinforce good habits and help you recognize how crucial discipline is in reaching your goals. Eventually these tasks will morph into projects that get you closer to meeting and influencing clients and winning engagements. It's much like training for a marathon: in order to go the distance you'll need to be smart, enthusiastic, and above all else, disciplined.

And as you move closer to partnership, you may discover there is a type of discipline you need to embrace for dealing with rejection. Many rainmakers say success is a matter of learning from rejection and realizing that each "no" gets you closer to a "yes." There is a kind of mental toughness involved in the process, requiring less focus on self and more on smart, relevant solutions and quality service. Embracing challenges now with dedication and discipline, while you are in a learning phase, will go a long way in preparing you for the demands of partnership.

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