



Week of **June 8, 2010**

Of Excellence, Dominance and Development

All law firms want excellent lawyers, and nearly all lawyers think they embody excellence. Is this kind of excellence like pornography, something without definition but clear when seen? Generally, an excellent lawyer is one sought by all clients to handle their matters, one who inspires confidence. This is a person who gets results and who is in frequent communication with clients to let them know how their matters are progressing without untoward surprises. By implication, this suggests that defining excellence is a process of analyzing client reactions. From whom in your firm will your clients prefer to take advice? In some sense, who has the biggest gross billings and how did they get that way? That may be one solid identifier of who your firm's excellent lawyers are.

There is a corollary here. Some lawyers (especially certain personal injury lawyers in virtually every city who feel compelled to do strident television advertising) seem to feel that the best lawyers are the toughest, that they are rude and obnoxious to their adversaries to show they are in control. Few clients would actually define this as excellence. On the contrary, such behavior often merely entrenches the opposition further, while substantially increasing unnecessary costs for all concerned. Excellence requires standing forthright to advocate our client's interest, without posturing or seeking an image of dominance or making demands that are totally outrageous and beyond the scope of reality. Again, firm and client alike know the excellent lawyers when they see them.

What if these lawyers are at another firm? My discussions with managing partners at a number of firms suggest that the best performers cannot be lured or stolen away. The more practical strategy is to develop excellent lawyers within the firm. This is more than just knowledge of legal specialties. It



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encompasses everything from "The Business of Law®" to client relations skills, and often can be taught by clearly excellent lawyers who take associates under their wing and mentor them to greater success. However, excellence is teachable only to those newer lawyers who pay attention, who really want to become excellent in their own right, and who have the work ethic required to become successful. In other words, we must first find the person who is willing to pay attention, who is willing to spend the time necessary to learn the skills that define excellence and who does not complain when there are long hours needed to commit to success. People who feel entitled to excellence will never achieve it.



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Personal Commentary

The "circle of life" is a concept I've heard a lot about throughout my life. To me, that means that you start in the world as a baby with dependency on others... and you end your life with dependency on others. But, there is a difference. When you enter the world, you have a certain DNA pattern that will enable you to grow, learn, develop and contribute to others. By the time you are on the other side of the spectrum, you have contributed mightily to the betterment of others in many ways. Note that I used the word, "spectrum." This infers a straight line, or at least the absence of a circle.

John Wooden, dead just a scant 4 months before reaching 100 years of age, is a classic example of having contributed to the well-being of so many people. Life is not circular. We need not whimper out; we need not abandon ourselves as we age. We can age gracefully and

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courageously. That is my hope for all of us.

Best wishes,

Ed Poll

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