



Week of **August 4, 2009**

## "Put Your Own Oxygen Mask on First"

Those who are regular readers of [LawBizBlog.com](http://LawBizBlog.com) may have seen my recent post about some personal challenges for my wife Paula and me that have led us to place renewed emphasis on taking care of ourselves—from better diet to personal time for relaxation. Our goal was simple and important: Reduce the stress that causes health problems. Stress, of course, is part of the job description for lawyers, and too many feel that they are somehow shirking their responsibilities if they are not stressed out. This attitude is both self-defeating and dangerous.

Consider the issue of billable time. Targeting six billable hours a day seems adequate, yet multiply five days by 50 weeks and it provides only 1,500 hours per year—well below what most firms target. Raise the target to eight hours of billable time a day and you get to 2,000 hours a year, which is close to what most firms expect. Yet how can lawyers get that many billable hours in per day and do business development, continuing education, pro bono work, and take care of personal responsibilities to a spouse, children and other family members?

Lawyers work hard, though not necessarily harder than other people. The thought of 2,000, 2,500 or even more, billable hours is one indication of workload. But in this instance, the billable hour is only a method of accounting; it is not the reason we work long hours. We work long hours because we love what we do; we love helping people; and we want to earn more money to better take care of our loved ones. Billable hours merely provide a method of accountability for

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those clients who may not otherwise see the value of what we do.

The airline mantra for dealing with loss of cabin pressure, *put your own oxygen mask on first and then attend to your children*, applies here. The equivalent in a law practice is to take a deep breath and really assess the demands that your practice places on you. Taking the time to think things through is the equivalent of a deep breath that restores perspective. Technology often conspires with traditional attitudes to make lawyers think they always know what needs to be done, and that they can do it if they just work hard enough and fast enough. That's asking far too much of anyone, and trying to do it often produces self-defeating fear and stress. A thousand-mile journey is nothing more than a series of steps; take them one at a time.

As lawyers, our real job is to help others and make their lives better. I truly believe that most lawyers, at heart, love their profession. As Confucius said, "Pursue a job you love and you'll never have to work a day in your life." The trick is to get past the distractions and stress so you can see your career for what you want it to be, and allow yourself the time you need to pursue it in a personally satisfying way.

## Personal Commentary

We just completed our maiden voyage in the Vintage Airstream. The journey was great and our SteSpot (license plate) is back in the shop for tweaking. After a trip later this week to Detroit for a family wedding (a reversal of recent family members' health issues), we will begin to tour further to get our "sea legs" in the trailer. We met many nice people, which just reinforces the message that people, taken out of


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"I look at Ed as my business partner now—my once-a-week essential business meeting to take the pulse of my practice. During our one-hour phone conversations, we hash out the larger and smaller

their stressful pots, are helpful and warm. As lawyers, we need to appeal to that side of our clients which will make them more effective members of our team and will serve their interests better.

Best wishes,

Ed Poll

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business challenges of my law firm. I always come away from those conversations enlarged, challenged, and sometimes even quite shaken, but with the tools necessary to move forward down the path he and I are constantly redefining for me and my firm."

*-AL, Northern California*

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