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**Seven Critical Components
to Building a Successful Firm**

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Seven Critical Components to Building a Successful Firm

Know yourself. Do you like to work alone as a sole practitioner? Do you want a partner to compensate for your weak spots and help you grow? Or are you a team player who likes being part of a group that can bring a variety of expertise and talent to a client? Knowing for certain which kind of person you are will go a long way toward ensuring your success. Loners who attempt partnership often cause frustration for themselves and misery for their partners. Similarly, group players who attempt to go it alone usually do not succeed because they miss some of the dynamics of team activity: collaboration, workload management, joint marketing, expense sharing, or reliance on others' skills.

Have a clear vision and strategy. It is important to know what type of firm you wish to have. Many attorneys think this will happen automatically; for them it is more of an afterthought than a plan. While no one would build a home or office building without a blueprint, attorneys often launch firm with no idea whatsoever as to their size, clientele, practice areas, or nature (boutique, generalist, multi-specialty). Once deciding these matters, you must decide how you will go about building your firm. Not having a clear and workable strategy is the chief cause of failure for firms. Consider factors such as the means of networking and marketing you will use, and how you will manage your time so that client service does not sabotage your marketing.

Take consistent action, and be accountable. Attorneys are often so busy with client demands that they fail to consistently focus on business growth and management. Just like plants or children, firms that receive scant attention often go awry. A detailed written plan for the growth of your firm will make judging progress and hitting milestones much easier. Having another attorney, a business consultant, or a friend hold you accountable will make a huge difference in your success. Avoid someone who is emotionally attached to you; this person must be willing to be honest and relentless with you in demanding progress.

Design a way of talking about your practice that sets you apart. Attorneys have a jargon uniquely their own that they understand among their peers but often communicate poorly with

clients. Be sure that the way you describe your work actually resonates with your desired clientele. Write down your introductions, and practice them. Talk with existing clients, and use the introduction in a practice session. Ask them if you are clearly communicating the services and value you provide in a manner that can be understood by potential clients who have not hired you or any lawyer before. People can't hire you if they don't understand why they need you or how you can help them.

Nurture your clients. This seems obvious, but many attorneys forget that the best source of business is recommendation by previous clients who have had a good experience with you. Take care of your clients while their cases are active, but more importantly, stay in regular communication with them — all of them — even after your work is finished. This habit alone will bring referrals, repeat business, good professional repute, and even friends.

Ask for help when you find yourself struggling or floundering. Let's face it: Attorneys are typically bright, well-educated people, but these admirable traits do not lend themselves well to asking for help or even admitting that help is needed. However, if your firm is stagnating or floundering, or you're experiencing a business or personal crisis, get help early from an executive coach, business consultant, accountant, or other professional who is specifically focused on your problem. The guidance will most likely be invaluable.

Appreciate and praise those who help you succeed. This includes your staff, clients, referral sources, associates, partners, judges, and court personnel. Remember, most especially, to thank and praise your spouse or significant other (and perhaps your children), whose support and love feeds and nourishes you. More than anything else, honest recognition and praise of a job done well will smooth the pathway to growth and success.

— Submitted by Dennis McCue at the request of the Law Practice Management Section Executive Committee. McCue is a certified management consultant and principal of Dynamic Firm Management, dedicated to making law firms more successful. He can be reached at (949) 640-2220 or www.dynamicfirm.com. The opinions expressed are his own.