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Happy clients and new challenges

Here is a portion of the conversation. Watch the video at chicagolawyer-magazine.com.

What do you do to try to figure out what will make your supervisors and clients happy?

Martini: There are a few things you can do when trying to make clients happy. First, you must listen carefully to what your clients are saying and what they are asking for, particularly at the beginning of your relationship. More often than not, they will provide you with valuable information about their “wish list,” including their expectations, the deliverable they want and how they prefer to communicate. In those instances where they do not provide this information, it is incumbent upon you to ask the necessary questions at the right time.

There are other sources that can help in providing a context for your client relationships. If you know lawyers who have experience working with certain clients, they can provide you with valuable insight that you might not otherwise obtain on your own. You can also reach out to experienced practitioners and mentors to get some general advice and also do some research about your clients to better understand their businesses, successes and challenges. Finally, it is helpful to take a step back and think about how you would approach the role as client and what you would want from your outside counsel. It is always helpful to put yourself in their shoes as a means of predicting their likely approach and needs.

Susler: Everything Tina said applies equally to in-house lawyers. What is unique for in-house counsel is that we are both clients of our outside counsel and the attorneys for our in-house clients (who are our colleagues and possibly our supervisors as well). The challenge at times is to delicately walk the line as both

lawyer and employee. We must remember that our legal duty runs to the company, not to any individual employee, which is not always easy when the president is sitting across the table looking you in the eye. That is why it is so important to establish credibility and a good rapport with your in-house clients and supervisors.

How do you seek out new challenges at the office when it doesn't seem like you have time for added responsibilities or new tasks?

Martini: First, you must be open to new challenges if you want to progress professionally. If you welcome these possibilities, they will begin presenting themselves in your life and you will then need to be prepared for when opportunity is knocking at your door.

In order to make time for new experiences, you should periodically examine all of your current responsibilities to assess whether the highest and most valuable use of your time is to continue with them or whether you should be doing other things. You may develop a more efficient way of doing things or identify other people to whom you can transition some of your work. This will not only free you up for other activities, but will also give you the opportunity to mentor others and help them to develop and grow.

Susler: One of the best things about being an in-house generalist is that new challenges find me on a regular basis, whether or not I am looking for them. My job is similar to Chicago's weather — wait five minutes and it will change. While new challenges find me, I also go looking for them. I read about changes in the law and trends in the profession. If I think we need to implement something new, I talk with my boss about it. Working in a two-lawyer department, if I suggest it, it will likely

become my responsibility to get it done. If it is important, then there is time to do it. If not, then it can wait.

What's the connection between socializing with colleagues, attending work functions and one's chance at success?

Martini: Professional success hinges on a few factors, including the quality of the relationships you have with your colleagues and clients. It is very difficult to build alliances and to develop the trust and credibility that comes with them unless you put yourself in situations where you are able to meaningfully interact with others and get to know them better. Work functions are often the easiest way to do just that. Having a level of comfort with your colleagues helps ensure that they will think of you the next time they have an issue that is within your area of expertise, and vice versa. It also facilitates other types of workplace collaboration, including leadership, business development, recruiting and integration activities.

Susler: I agree; these connections are critically important. As I have said many times, people need to know me, like me and trust me or they won't give me business. For in-house lawyers, this is especially true regarding business colleagues. It is equally the case in law firms, especially large firms where cross-selling among practice areas is essential to the success of both the firm and individual lawyers. Socializing and attending work functions together help establish the rapport and credibility with your clients and colleagues that are critically important to success on every level. When done with an open mind, such activities not only help build business, they can also enhance job satisfaction. ■

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