

## Doing the little things right

### Practice management requires attention to detail

**I**n the context of your career, what does it mean to manage your practice?

**Martini:** As a partner in a global law firm, managing my practice is very much like running a business. The clients always come first — getting them, doing a stellar job on the work and proliferating those relationships. It also means making sure we have the right talent to service the work and to grow the practice. The business development angle is obviously a critical part of the practice — much more so than five years ago. What makes it particularly challenging is that it is not just about going out and finding any client who wants to work with you. It's about finding the right kind of client for the practice and for the firm. The relationship needs to make good business sense, both substantively and economically. This is no easy feat, given that the demand for legal services has been relatively flat for a long time and is not expected to change.

**Susler:** Managing my in-house practice is surprisingly similar. As one of two lawyers in my law department of a multifaceted manufacturing company with factories in the U.S. and Mexico and doing business all over the world, my clients also come first, as our mutual goal and responsibility is to keep business moving forward. I must develop strong relationships with all of my business colleagues, especially the senior management of each op-co. Getting the right talent in my practice requires involving the appropriate business stakeholders and, when necessary, retaining the best outside counsel for that matter.

**What are the most important aspects of successfully managing a practice?**

**Martini:** There are many key ingredients, so I will name just a few. Of course, the substantive lawyering is what drives the engine — and if you and your team aren't great lawyers first and foremost, it makes it very difficult to successfully build, grow and manage a practice. For that reason, having a strong talent management program is key — particularly for associates — so that they get substantive, real-time feedback and can learn how to be better lawyers. A critical part of the teaching needs to be about client service, which goes way beyond just getting the right legal answer. It includes knowing how to properly frame the advice and understanding clients' expectations on deliverables and becoming their trusted adviser.

The financial aspects of managing a practice are also crucial. This includes ensuring there is alignment between how clients define value



#### Inside Out

**Christina L. Martini** is a practicing attorney, author and columnist. She is chair of the Chicago intellectual property practice group at DLA Piper and sits on its executive committee. She focuses on domestic and international trademark, copyright, domain name, Internet, advertising and unfair competition law.

Martini's husband, **David G. Susler**, is associate general counsel with National Material L.P., a manufacturing company primarily engaged in steel processing and aluminum extrusion. He has a general practice, providing advice, counseling and training to all business sectors and operation.

Watch them talk more about this topic with the Better Government Association's Andy Shaw at [chicagolawyer.com](http://chicagolawyer.com). To submit a question for future columns, e-mail [questions.insideout@gmail.com](mailto:questions.insideout@gmail.com).

and what a particular matter will end up costing them. As with every other business, bills need to be timely paid to keep the lights on, and metrics such as utilization, realization and profitability are regularly examined.

**Susler:** Client service is also of paramount importance in an in-house context. As we have said before, businesses do not have legal issues, they

have business issues with legal aspects. Client service for me includes maintaining a deep understanding of all our businesses, developing strong relationships with the business leaders to ensure they think of me as a trusted adviser and key team member.

I must consistently provide excellent advice, which in turn requires me to keep current with legal and business trends affecting our businesses. There are so many quickly moving pieces in a practice like mine that constant prioritizing and reprioritizing is critical. Also, anticipating and providing necessary legal services and training before being asked to do so by my clients — proactive risk management — is important and beneficial. While my clients may not have asked for it this time, now they know they need to involve legal (department) or have training going forward and they will ask for it in the future.

**What are some of the lessons you have learned over the years about managing your practice?**

**Martini:** There are a lot of moving pieces, and you need to make sure they all fit together in a way that makes sense and creates a pathway for success. It takes a village to sustain and propel a practice forward, and everyone should be respected for the part they play. Furthermore, practices are not static — they are fluid and dynamic — which means that people's roles will morph and change over time, particularly as they gain new and different experiences. It's important to take a step back and evaluate the situation holistically on a regular basis so as to make periodic adjustments in response to these changes. And just as those around you will evolve over time, so will you — so you need to look in the mirror often and think about your own growth process and where it is leading you.

**Susler:** Remaining calm in the face of apparent chaos, going with the flow and being comfortable going outside your comfort zone are critical. In-house lawyers are often looked to for their leadership, however, sometimes we must lead from the sidelines rather than from the dais. ■

[questions.insideout@gmail.com](mailto:questions.insideout@gmail.com)