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Lawyer shares 3 principles of practice

For the past five months I have written about my own experiences, ideas and observations related to marketing and client service in the legal industry. My columns and comments have been limited to the extent they only reflect one person's view — mine. In the coming months, I will share insights and observations from other Chicago attorneys, all of whom have distinguished professional and civic careers giving them unique and rare perspectives about client service and marketing in the legal industry that are worth learning.

Robert A. Helman of Mayer, Brown LLP can be credited with more professional and civic accomplishments than there are streaks of light on a nighttime photograph of a bustling Lake Shore Drive. Helman, known as Bob to clients and friends, was chairman of Mayer, Brown's management committee between 1984 and 1998. As a long-standing leader of such a large and distinguished law firm, Bob has sat ringside to virtually all of the marketing and client service issues previously discussed in this column. I recently sat down with Bob, who was open and gracious enough to share his own firsthand impressions.

In our conversation, Bob shared many examples highlighting his 50 plus-year approach to client service in the legal profession. When distilled down to basics, my impression is that Bob attributes much of his success as a lawyer to three simple principles and a bountiful helping of good luck. They are: 1) consistently provide excellent legal work product to the client; 2) show concern for the client's needs; and 3) charge the client a fair price for legal work. Bob gave specific examples of each one of these principles and suggested that, when combined with good fortune, they can be constructive and beneficial tools

to use in one's legal career.

Excellent Legal Work

Lawyers, Bob explained, are not fungible. Indeed, some lawyers are more careful, thoughtful, wise, skilled and committed than others. It is these exceptional lawyers, he suggested, that stand out and either attract new clients or retain existing clients by consistently turning out excellent legal work. Clients are quite capable of discerning between lawyers who provide mediocre legal work and those who provide outstanding work. Bob's clients have come to expect and rely on the fact that legal work performed by him and/or his colleagues at Mayer, Brown will be excellent — regardless of the nature of the project or inherent project deadlines. It is precisely this standard of excellence that allows Bob's clients to trust, without hesitation, that their most significant issues and cases will be handled properly and by superb lawyers. This well-known standard of legal excellence attracts new clients and retains existing ones.

Showing concern for the client's needs (The Human Condition)

Bob emphasized that when dealing with existing or new clients, it is imperative to show concern for their needs. He does this by engaging in what he described as "understanding the human condition." I intentionally did not ask Bob what he meant by this phrase and tried, through the balance of our conversation, to determine for myself what he was talking about. What I concluded from his use of the phrase "understanding the human condition" is this. We are all human beings, each of us with our own unique backgrounds, talents, sensitivities, needs, desires, abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Lawyers and their clients share a common humanity warranting mutual respect and careful attention.

GONE FISHIN'



JOSHUA S. HYMAN

Joshua S. Hyman is a shareholder with Chuhak & Tecson P.C. and co-chairs the firm's 18-attorney bank practice group. Since 1989, Josh has provided banks and commercial finance companies, including both national institutions and locally based lenders, with results-oriented, efficient and highly responsive representation in a broad range of matters, including structuring loan transactions, negotiating, and drafting loan and collateral documents. He also advises lenders and other secured creditors in bankruptcy proceedings, workouts and other creditors' rights matters, as well as representing them in lender liability suits.

Bob shared that the best way to understand the human condition of a client is to: 1) always listen carefully to what the client is saying and 2) try and understand the client's underlying concerns, motivations, fears, hopes and expectations — even if they are not expressly articulated. By doing this, Bob better connects with his clients and can provide counsel to them that demonstrates his real concern for their needs.

Bob applies the same approach when interacting with his colleagues at Mayer, Brown. He seeks to understand the human condition of the person he is dealing with so that the interaction is as productive and constructive as possible. For me it was somewhat counterintuitive to hear his reference to the "human condition" within a large law firm. Although I have never worked in a large law firm, my impression is that they are not organizations particularly

sensitive to the "human condition." After all, from an outsider's view, there does not appear to be a lot of sensitivity to the human condition when lawyers are expected to bill 2,200 plus hours a year, work weekends and operate under extreme pressure. But I think this is what distinguishes Bob and makes him so special as a person, lawyer and leader. Having served in leadership positions at my own firm, I never actively considered the "human condition" when dealing with firm issues. Going forward, I most assuredly will.

Charging the client a fair price for the legal product

Lawyers of Bob's pedigree who work in large law firms for their entire career are accustomed to billing at hourly rates that are higher than those billed at smaller firms. Bob's clients understand this matrix and are willing to pay for his excellence and the excellence of his colleagues. But this does not mean that clients turn a blind eye to their legal fees. From our discussion, I understand that Bob applies a value test to each bill he sends out. In order to do this, Bob puts himself in the client's shoes and determines whether he (as the client) would be comfortable paying the billed amount for a particular transaction or piece of litigation. This value test and his ability to assess the appropriateness of an invoice through the client's eyes ensures that Bob's clients are, in fact, charged a fair price for the legal work he and/or his firm provides.

These three principles may not seem novel to some. However, if they are truly the cornerstone of one's practice and consistently applied over a 50-year career, and if a person has the requisite amount of good luck along the way, a young lawyer might just end up being the next Bob Helman. What an accomplishment that would be.