Getting Your First Client: You're Already There

Jonathan D. Klein, The Legal Intelligencer

January 18, 2017

It is a hornbook principle of legal practice that you will live and die by your book of business if you work at a law firm. So great is the emphasis on developing such a book that associates (particularly junior associates) often do not realize that their first client is just a couple doors down the hall. Indeed, before you are—hopefully—promoted to partner (and let's be honest, if you are an associate who plans to remain in the private sector, that is generally the goal), the partners you work for as an associate have to trust in your abilities as a lawyer. No associate is ever going to make partner if they have a bad reputation or the partnership lacks confidence in them. So how do you demonstrate that you are an all-star associate ready to work hard and—hopefully—one day become a partner? The answer may surprise you because it is so simple: treat every partner you work for as a client.

Congratulations! For many of you reading this, you just got your first client(s). Who knew it would be that easy? I'm sorry to inform you that there will be no origination for this client unfortunately, but the future benefits you will reap will make following this advice worthwhile. Now I'm not saying this is going to be an easy endeavor and may take years of effort. Certainly, as you are probably already well aware, law firm life is a mixture of great people and others with "quirky" personalities. If you learn to handle partners in each category, you will undoubtedly succeed (and be better prepared for outside client interactions). So what does it mean to treat a partner as a client? Every action you take with a partner should be in the furtherance of your goal to build trust and confidence and retain work from that partner (just as you would with an outside client). The following provides a good starting point for how to approach this task.

Be Responsive

In this digital, hyper-connected age of smartphones, laptops and email, it seems somewhat silly to suggest that you be responsive to partners, but in practice associates may not understand what being responsive really means. By now you should understand that—with some exceptions—we associates may be contacted by a partner any time of day or night (whether that is appropriate to do is another story). To be a responsive associate to your "client," however, does not mean foregoing any semblance of a social life in case a partner contacts you.

Instead, it means answering as soon as you are able or, at a minimum, acknowledging receipt of the email or telephone call. The goal is to ensure that the partner sees that you are actually communicating (which in turn builds trust). The worst thing you can do as an associate is read an email or listen to a voicemail and never respond. (Practice tip: Even if an email does not appear to warrant a response, always respond—whether with "Thank you," "Will do," or "On it." Such a basic act indicates to the partner that you understand what needs to be done.)

Think about how you would handle an email or call from an outside client. Would you not respond to their email? Would you take a day or two to respond to a call? I hope not. The same applies with equal or greater force to partners. Failure to maintain trust with an outside client may result in losing that client. That is obviously bad. But, failure to maintain trust with a partner at your firm by virtue of your nonresponsiveness is far worse because it means you have lost a - potential ally who may fight for your success and support your advancement.

Be Diligent

By our very function, if you are an associate at a law firm (junior and senior), you will do a lot of work for partners. However, simply doing work is not enough to get you to a point where a partner relies on you because he or she trusts your judgment. The same, of course, is true of an outside client who will only continue to send you work if you are trustworthy. When you receive an assignment, whether it is researching a legal topic, writing a memorandum or a brief (in whole or in part), you always want to go the extra mile and submit good work.

Of course, your work is never going to be perfect because everyone has different writing styles and some partners just love to redline. But, whatever the assignment may be, you want to be attentive and meticulous. Do not view your assignments in a vacuum. Just as you should consider all potential arguments for a case for an outside client, so too should you take each assignment as an opportunity (assuming you are staffed on a case and aware of the facts and procedural history) to look at every angle or argument to advance your cause.

Being diligent also contemplates keeping partners informed about your progress on an assignment. Lawyers have an ethical obligation to keep our outside clients informed, updated and included in strategy decisions and discussions (to an extent). The same is true with partners at your law firm. A partner should never have to email or call you to find out the status of an assignment. Even if you are still researching and writing, a simple update maintains expectations and shows the partner that you are working hard.

In an industry built on relationships, the most commonly overlooked relationship is the one you are forming each day within the walls of your law firm. Treating partners as clients builds relationships that will ultimately help you succeed. The partners you work for now were once in your position. By earning their trust, they are likely to share their insights, their ideas, and, if you're particularly lucky, their contacts. Do not focus solely on outside clients at the expense of the partners you work for. They are, and always will be, your first client and how well you do with them sets the tone for how well you will do as a lawyer. Being a lawyer is always more fruitful with more clients who trust and respect you. •

Jonathan D. Klein is an associate at Clark Hill in Philadelphia. He represents clients on a wide range of complex commercial litigation in both federal and state courts and before institutional and ad hoc arbitral tribunals. Klein's diverse practice includes, but is not limited to, cybersecurity and data protection, financial services litigation, compliance and internal investigations, and appellate work. He welcomes opinions about this article and can be contacted at jklein@clarkhill.com or 215-640-8535.