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### "Making Partner...Perhaps"

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I was asked to write a column on "how to make partner." Unfortunately, I can't write that column because there is no such thing as an exact formula. But what I can write is a how-to guide on making yourself the best lawyer possible. Though it's not as tidy, it stands to reason that, in the end, being a great lawyer will reap you as many -- if not more -- dividends than a partnership.

Great lawyers are superb technicians, excruciatingly hard workers, dependable team players and pleasant to be around.

Great lawyers often make partner. Sometimes they don't. It should come as no surprise that the partnership decision isn't always based on factors entirely within the would-be partner's control. The economy could have tanked, and the firm isn't making partners the way it used to; the candidate's practice area may be under-leveraged, or simply unprofitable; key partners may have left the firm, leaving its budget tight; or the firm doesn't need another partner in that particular section.

But, if the associate has done all he could to make himself a great lawyer, he will more than likely do quite well for himself elsewhere.

#### **Competence, Competence**

Though it may sound trite, there's no surer path to partnership than being exceptionally competent. A lawyer who knows her way around a complex transaction is a lawyer I want on my team. An associate who doesn't need his hand held when I ask him to draft a demand letter -- even though he has no earthly idea what a demand letter is, why it's important and how a demand letter in Texas is different from one in Colorado -- is an associate I want to work with again.

Becoming competent is fairly simple: Take advantage of every opportunity to learn. Each seemingly cookie-cutter response to interrogatories and every round of Shepardizing is a chance to enrich your knowledge, and you should mercilessly exploit it as such.

Your mind-set should be one of an owner, not a cog. Though you may be assigned to a small part of a larger transaction, do everything within your power to facilitate the rest of the deal. What is different about this deal that needs to be accounted for? What does this "boilerplate" really mean? What else should I be doing to make the deal run smoothly?

No matter how much of a rush you are in to complete the project, never resort to mindlessly replacing the names, filling in blanks or counting on someone else to correct your work. These are surefire ways to disaster.

#### **In My Day**

You've all heard more senior lawyers grouching about "this generation" of lawyers, and how they don't want to work. After all, we partners say, if we had to pull all-nighters just to satisfy the whims of a client who absolutely must have an answer by 9 a.m. tomorrow, so should this crop of associates.

Well, we're right.

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Long hours are an integral part of the job. The legal profession is a service industry. That means we're judged on and paid for the service we provide. And if a service is provided shoddily and slowly, it may as well not have been provided at all.

We know it's not fun canceling dinner plans when a panicky partner comes into your office at 6:30 p.m. looking for emergency help on a deal. Don't complain or show your frustration when this happens. Believe it or not, we don't enjoy ruining your evening. And we are quite aware that billing 2,400 hours a year (or whatever your firm expects) means you don't have your weekends to yourself.

We know because we did it ourselves. And it made us better lawyers.

Law firms pay a lot of money to their associates -- far more, frankly, than you're worth when you join. It's an investment, both in you and your skills. What that means is that you will often feel like you don't control your own schedule. And it may mean that you will have to reprioritize your life.

Becoming a truly great lawyer is not a 40-hour-a-week job. The law is complicated. As a result, it is not merely client demands that result in long hours. It is the fact that, especially during the first few years of practice, lawyers must spend an incredible amount of time becoming proficient. Sometimes it may seem that this time is wasted. But it isn't. It is part of the process that ultimately results in your becoming a better lawyer.

### **There Is No "I" in Team**

The old coaching mantra also holds true for law firms. A great lawyer does everything she can to make her client, her partners and her firm look good. Aside from doing an extraordinary job for clients, this also means contributing to the firm beyond your technical expertise. Recruiting, pro bono work, associate training, civic and charitable activities, being active in your community, business development -- all these reflect well on your firm.

The sticky part is knowing what your firm values. If you sense that serving on the symphony board is rewarded, but associate training isn't, take note. Not all firms value pro bono. Keep your antenna raised. Are you an amateur bowler at a country-club firm? Perhaps you should reconsider your hobbies, or look for a firm more your style.

Along these team-player lines, watch the self-promotion. Though this flies in the face of every marketing guru's advice, don't be your own best spokesman. Let the partner you're working for tout your good deeds. Nothing is more annoying than an associate who blows his own horn. It's usually off-key, and nobody wants to hear it.

Trust me: Almost everybody knows who does good work. If you happen to be working for a self-aggrandizing partner who never shares the credit, his colleagues know it, and they probably also know that you did everything he's claiming as his own.

### **Count Your Party Invites**

The truth is people want to be partners with people they would like to have as partners. That's not as tautological as it may seem.

A partner is someone you can count on to bring in desirable clients; who has a good attitude; who can handle herself at a cocktail party without embarrassing you or the firm; who looks after the needs of others as much as, if not more than, his own needs; who you'd like to have over to your house for dinner once in a while.

All of these are the qualities of someone you want at your side, literally and figuratively. And all of these -- combined with competence, good work ethic, and team spirit -- are the attributes clients want in their lawyers.

You may have noticed that I haven't talked much about business generation. That's because, in and of itself, it's not the key to partnership at most firms (there are exceptions, of course). Though it's not unheard of for an associate to have her own significant clients, most firms know that generating desirable business is more likely to occur after one ascends into the

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partnership ranks. At that point, you have a vote of confidence from an entire institution.

Nonetheless, you should pursue most business generation opportunities that arise. Business development isn't a light switch that can be turned on and off at will. It is a skill that is honed over time. And though it isn't always key to making partner, generating and retaining clients is crucial if you become partner.

And if you don't ascend to those hallowed ranks -- but you've pursued every learning opportunity put before you, worked excruciating hours, been the MVP on every project, and sharpened your business development skills -- you'll come out ahead anyway.