



“How Can I Help You Today?”

Skills and Professional Development



Imagine the following scene: You arrive at a building. You are welcomed by your host. You are escorted into an inner office with wood-paneled walls and offered a seat in a plush leather wingback chair. Your host offers you a beverage: “Would you like a cup of coffee or some water?”

“A glass of water would be great,” you reply. He pours you a glass of water from a nearby pitcher, hands it to you, and then sits behind a large oak desk facing you and says, “Now, how can I help you today?”

With minor variations, I imagine this scene being played out across thousands of legal offices every day around the world. Well, maybe thousands of offices of outside counsel attorneys. Service is inherent to the practice of law for outside counsel. Setting a tone of service and solicitude at the first meeting is fundamental to establishing a good attorney-client relationship. The client is invited to seek the attorney’s counsel.

Now, picture another scene: You take the elevator to the 10th floor of your building to the legal department. You wander the halls until you see the name you were provided on the office door. The door is ajar. You tentatively knock and peek into the room. The person in the room sits behind a desk piled high with papers, sticky notes scattered around her computer screen. She tilts her head to the side, lets out a weary and slightly exasperated sigh, and says in a flat and unwelcoming tone, “Yes ... what do you want?”

Not quite the same scene, is it?

How many of us can identify with the second scene described? Is it safe for me to say that I have been that lawyer more often than I would like to admit? Well, I have. Firefighting can take its toll on us. When we, as in-house counsel, are called upon time and again to fix something that someone else has broken or to find a way out of a situation that could have been easily avoided, we can get a little — shall I say — prickly. This is especially true when we have participated in establishing preventative measures, policies, and procedures to head off those situations before they occur. We have installed procedural “fire alarms” and provided training on the dangers of “flammables” (e.g., acts to avoid, clauses not to include, compliance requirements). And yet, the fires still happen.

It is no surprise that in our “heat exhaustion,” our first words are “What do you want?” instead of “How can I help you today?”

In pondering a solution to this, my mind recalled a line from *The Princess Bride*, one of my all-time favorite movies: “*When a job goes wrong, go back to the beginning.*”

That seems like sound advice to me. When we have been traveling on the same road too long and have lost sight of where we started, or when our tolerance and energy reserves are depleted, perhaps it’s time to go back to the beginning. Take a moment to remember where we started — either in our career or in our current position. Recall that initial enthusiasm and ask yourself what would it take to mentally begin again, before the frustration and emotional baggage of your position piled so high that it crowded out your awareness of the service aspect of your job.

I recommend you take a day, possibly even a Wednesday, off. Yes, I said Wednesday! Maybe you need a long weekend, or a week or two off? You need to take some time to regroup when the job goes wrong. And “wrong” can mean many things: being overworked or worked over, health issues, morale issues, company reorganization, company sold, company bought, change to cubicles, or just plain sick and tired of it all. Wrongs can result in wrong-thinking such as “I’m stuck.” What do you need to get un-stuck: a new job, a new position in your company, an office rearrange, lunch away from your desk every day, a vacation, a good meal, or maybe just a few good nights of sleep?

You don’t have to be stuck; you can begin again. Think about what you need to do to get over the wrongs and get back to asking people: “How can I help you?”

If we all took time to do this, maybe, just maybe “legal” would cease to be the proverbial four letter word to the rest of the company.

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