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Small Law: Care and Feeling

Skills and Professional Development



In my April column, after several articles about being an in-house attorney in transition, I was ready to move away from the topic and toward subjects of broader interest to the small law department community. I went so far as to state that if I ever did write something on the “care and feeding of an in-transition in-house attorney,” I’d put it on LinkedIn or the like. I’ve reconsidered that decision after receiving feedback on my latest column.

During my tenure writing this column, I have had trouble meeting the agreed-upon, reasonable, and well communicated deadlines established by my editor. One consequence of this (aside from my editor demonstrating his reserves of grace, patience, and professionalism) is that I started hearing from readers of April’s column before I’d completed (I’m sorry; started) this one. Several said they weren’t tired of reading about overcoming transition challenges, and a few specifically stated they’d welcome more coverage of the “care and feeding” topic. One suggested that the column should appear on the right-hand page in the layout to facilitate folding the magazine open at the article for a little strategic leaving-around.

I have plenty of thoughts to share about what my friends, family, and colleagues did or said during my transition period that particularly encouraged, inspired, amused, or exasperated me. At the very top

of my “peeve” list is the question “So, how’s the job search coming along?” Every time it was asked, I knew the questioners truly cared about me and wished for a good outcome; even so, sometimes it was all I could do to not coldly answer with “it continues,” while nonverbally indicating that that was all I had to say on the topic.

Atop the list of things I was most grateful for was the time given to me by so many people who had gone, or were still going, through this ordeal. I learned so much from their stories, was inspired by the invariably happy outcomes they achieved, comforted to know I wasn’t alone, and grateful to be able to reciprocate the support. It occurred to me that I should turn again to these people to ask whether my joys and frustrations matched theirs, or if there were big positives or negatives that hadn’t really registered with me during my own search. So, I sent several notes, promised anonymity to responders, and waited. I didn’t have to wait long.

The first thing I learned was that no one else reported having been troubled by the “How’s the search going?” question. To each of them, it seemed like an entirely reasonable thing to expect to hear from anyone close enough to them to know of their transition (and they, like I, had made sure many, many people knew of it). After a little time spent contemplating if that means I’m just a heartless so-and-so, I read on, and things began to make more sense.

The thing that everyone, without exception, reported as being their source of greatest frustration from those close to them was being told some variation of “I’m sure it’ll all work out/You’re so smart and talented/Someone’s going to be very lucky they found you.” They reported feeling frustrated at the received platitudes and longed for something more practical, like new networking connections.

It occurred to me as I reflected on this that even though my primary peeve didn’t match theirs, I think we were reacting to the very same encounters and conversations, with my aggravation at the beginning and theirs at the end. The conversation begins with the inquiry, which prompts a review of efforts made, interviews had, positions applied for, and upper lips kept stiff. If that recitation concludes with anything less than near-certainty that a job offer is expected any day now, the response, invariably, is some version of “Hang in there; I’m sure you’ll find something.”

What we definitely had in common was a deep understanding that, all gripes aside, we couldn’t have made it through our respective transitions without the care and support of those close to us. We also understand that so many of these people are quite literally experiencing these transitions with and through us, and they need support and empathy just as we do. So, if you’re one who’s reading this after having found this magazine open to this page on your nightstand or end table, please know that your spouse, partner, child, parent, sibling, friend, or colleague appreciates you being there for them, even if they don’t always seem to!

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