

THE HARD PART OF SOFT SKILLS

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I was enjoying an engaging conversation with a law firm leader about the future of his firm, their growth trajectory and the palpable pains of rapid additions and expansion. I say I was enjoying it because the unfortunate (and predictable) turn of the conversation was when we were discussing the leadership development of the executive team and the practice group chairs.

First the facts: (a) Firm is very successful (translate: profitable); (b) Firm is rapidly growing (translate: even more profitable); (c) Firm is struggling to manage the change. Uh oh, change. That's soft. That's amorphous. That's....a.....problem.

I know that soft skills like listening, addressing conflict, building teams and relationships, growing your own awareness in both your communication skills and your personal preferences are the very core of success. Not everyone understands this and I think it's because we haven't made a translation that strikes the bottom line. Let me offer you the A, B, C's of hard money benefits for that investment in soft skill training.

ADDRESSING CONFLICT Many of the challenges we face in life are related to conflicts we try to avoid. If we harnessed all that wasted energy avoiding conflict we would gain full days of productive lives! If we go back to my conversation with the law firm leader, where "success" which really meant "profit", then conflict management skills are an investment that has significant dividends. If you want to calculate your cost of conflict, [download this document](#) and do the math for yourself. When that conflict management muscle is grown and strengthened, relationships develop with more depth and trust.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND TEAMS The American love of sports is centuries old. We like analogies of teamwork and productivity to successful athletic performances. And, somehow, there is still a disconnect in calculating the value of teams in law firms. Only very recently have firms begun to address administrative teams and this began as a response to the growing shortage of legal assistants coupled with the increased demands from clients for reporting and sharing of case information. Teams provide the backbone to support time off in a 24/7 world, spreading responsibilities and knowledge, which is good risk management practice and smart business practice. The challenge is that building teams is more than assigning the people who share a client to a regular meeting to discuss said client. Building a team means building relationships and that can vary from bowling to lunch to assessment tools and specific content training.

COMMUNICATION My new friend and I are talking about how the owners of the firm relate to one another – whether it is entirely about the business of the meeting at hand or are they talking about strategy and direction of the firm. When they do talk about strategy are they speaking the same language? Communication is such a complex skill – listening, talking, and translating. Translating you ask? We each have some preference in how we receive and deliver information, and when we are spoken to in our preferred style we are much more open to receiving the information. This is part of self-awareness; being aware of the preferences you have which builds into relationships. If I prefer to hear things in concise statements, and you

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prefer to outline the process, we are likely to have some conflict – not in the content, but in the delivery. We've already discussed the cost of conflict, here I want to emphasize the benefit of understanding your own style and the satisfaction of building positive relationships – an intrinsic measure that has no dollar value. Or does it? If we are able to relate to each other through the language we hear best, how much more efficient is our communication? And, we strive for efficiencies to save time, don't we? Time is money, we all know that one!

Wrapping up my conversation with this new law firm friend included discussing how he might engage his partners in a meaningful conversation that included their communication style, examining conflicts that have been swept away by profits, and exploring how they can craft practice groups or client teams at this early stage in their evolution.

Maybe you already have teams. Have you examined conflict in them? How do you continue to build their relationships (trust, expertise, communication)? This is an investment that has profit all over it!

For more information and further reading on Managing Change, visit our [online library](#).



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Judy understands teams. And she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, finance, and legal management to help law firms improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

Bachelor's Degrees in Accounting and Physical Education | Master's Degree in Sports Management | Former Professional Athlete | Licensed Provider of Emotional Intelligence Tools | Certified Living Your Vision Facilitator | ALA Certified Legal Manager | ACE Certified Personal Trainer | ICF Professional Certified Coach

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