Unlocking The Secrets To Developing Your Future Rainmakers

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It's all about learning how to change.

I GIVE A FAIR NUMBER of client development presentations at law firm retreats and bar meetings. As I write this, I am preparing for such a presentation at a state bar meeting. I have been told that my presentations are motivating, that I have great credibility because I am a lawyer who has done what I teach (and have taught many other young lawyers to do it), and that my presentations are practical rather than theoretical. But too often when the lawyers who attend my presentations and are inspired to make rain head back to the daily routine of their offices, it is very likely they will not make meaningful changes toward that goal.

Over the many years I was a practice group leader and mentor for young lawyers, I often wondered why the transition from "worker bee" associate to a lawyer who develops new business and builds and expands relationships with existing clients was so difficult. I was especially befuddled because I knew the young lawyers who worked in my practice group instinctively knew they needed to change to achieve the success they desired, but still they did not change.

Now that I do programs on client development and I am coaching senior associates and junior partners on client development, I have a better idea than I had then. I have worked with a significantly greater number of lawyers than before and I have read more about the neuroscience associated with why people are reluctant to change even when they know they need to do so. I want to share with you what I have learned and how you can use it to develop your future rainmakers.

CHANGE—AND MAKING CLIENT DEVELOPMENT A HABIT—IS DIFFICULT • There was a fascinating article in Fast Company magazine a couple of years ago. The title was *Change or Die.* The article began by asking a pointed question: What if a well-informed, trusted authority figure said you had to make difficult and enduring changes in the way you think and act? If you didn't, your time would end soon—a lot sooner than it had to. Could you change when change really mattered? When it mattered most? I am confident that almost all of us would say we would change. We would even know that what we need to change is smoking, drinking, eating, stress, and not getting enough exercise. Yet, according to the article, studies show that 90 percent of coronary heart patients do not change. While this point addresses the challenge to get people to break bad habits, the point also applies to getting young lawyers to change from just focusing on getting their billable hours to also focusing on developing business with new and existing clients.

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The article ends with a discussion of training rats to have a new skill. The rat solves a puzzle and is given a food reward. After 100 times, the rat can solve the puzzle flawlessly. After 200 times, it can remember how to solve it for nearly its lifetime. Similarly, we have developed thousands of habits. For example, I do not have to think about how to brush my teeth, or tie my shoes, or where the keys are on the keyboard on which I am typing. Even though I haven't played baseball in over 30 years, I don't have to think about how to swing the bat. On the other hand, every time I am standing over a golf ball, my mind is full of thoughts about my swing.

For most lawyers, developing and building relationships with clients is not only rewarding financially, but also greatly fulfilling. Even knowing the benefits, for many young lawyers client development is very stressful and challenging. Neuroscience research suggests it is stressful and challenging because it is not a habit, it is not a part of the hard wiring of their brains and it requires making changes that at best may be uncomfortable at first.

So, what does this mean to you? Among other things, this means that just having a speaker come in and teach how to develop business will not likely cause the young lawyers to change what they are doing. I give many presentations at law firm retreats on client development. I feel I motivate and inspire young lawyers. My advice focuses on practical tips that young lawyers can implement to bring clients into the firm. I have come to realize that no matter how well my presentation goes, very few lawyers will retain the information and even fewer will actually make the changes necessary to apply what they have learned. In a three-hour presentation I have given them way too much information to digest and use.

Why Change Is Difficult

David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz have written a fascinating article titled *The Neuroscience of Leadership.* In the article, they refer to a 1997 study of 31 public sector managers by Baruch College researchers that found that a training program alone increased productivity 28 percent, but the addition of follow-up coaching to the training increased productivity 88 percent. Their study confirms what I have learned from working with attorneys about the relative effectiveness of client development training compared to the addition of follow-up coaching. The writers also point out that given the small capacity of working memory, many small bites of learning, digested over time, may be more efficient than large blocks of time spent in workshops.

Let me illustrate why change is difficult from an example that almost every teenager has experienced: learning to drive a car. Almost every single teenager dreams of the freedom that will come with being able to drive himself or herself around town. But the first time that young man or woman gets behind the wheel, especially in a car with a clutch, the rudimentary tools of shifting, braking, accelerating without lurching, and parallel parking seem incredibly difficult. Almost every teenager has known the terror of not passing the driving exam. But now, you can probably shift through every gear without even thinking about it. You don't second-guess yourself when reaching for the accelerator or brake. Not only has driving become second nature, but many people now multitask while doing it. The most difficult thing about learning to drive was taking the first step. After that, it became as natural as breathing.

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An example from my own life further illustrates just how difficult it is to implement change. In 2007, I bought a Mac PowerBook for myself and my trusty assistant with the intention of converting my entire office to Mac. But I continued to use my PC. It was simply easier to use the PC because I did not have to think about how to use the various programs. I had done it for years. Realizing that merely owning the Mac was not going to be enough, I bought a book titled *Switching to the Mac*. But simply reading the book was not enough. Several times, I almost gave up on my Mac conversion plan entirely. It was just too challenging and stressful to learn something so different. Then, I discovered two things. First, for a very modest annual fee, I could get one-on-one lessons as often as once a week at my local Apple store. Second, I discovered that Apple produces a weekly one-minute video podcast on topics that were really helpful to me. These are both examples of coaching. As a result of this coaching, in January of 2008, I went cold turkey and completely switched over to Mac. Each day using the programs on my Mac is becoming more of a habit and far less stressful.

WHY CLIENT DEVELOPMENT COACHING WORKS • So what do my stories have to do with young lawyers learning to become focused on client development? For most young lawyers, client development is not part of their hard wiring and not a habit. At best it requires them to change their routines and get outside of their comfort zones. They can rationalize reasons not to be actively doing what is needed to build a book of business or expand relationships with existing clients. The most common thing I hear is: "I have been so busy with billable work that I have not been able to…." Why is this rationalization so frequently used? Put simply, being busy with billable work is something that is familiar to lawyers and thus more comfortable and less risky than doing client development activities.

In fact, most lawyers dislike the entire concept of engaging in business development. To some lawyers, the idea of business development conjures up images of insurance representatives and car salesmen. In addition, many lawyers simply lack a clear understanding of what good business development practices are. Young lawyers receive extensive education and training for analyzing legal issues, drafting agreements, and using principles of persuasion. The feedback and incentives for this type of work are prevalent, and law firms enthusiastically reward billable hours. But business development is another story. Young lawyers typically receive less than a few hours of instruction on business development each year. Moreover, the incentives to spend time creating a business plan, cultivating relationships with potential clients, and marketing a particular expertise are much less tangible than the incentives for billing time and doing good legal work.

Coaching For Change

If we want young lawyers to become successful at client development, we have to find ways to get those lawyers through the challenges of making changes until client development becomes part of their hardwiring, just like driving a car. In addition, lawyers should be incentivized to focus on business development so it becomes a positive and natural aspect of their careers instead of something they approach with reluctance or dread. As discussed below, I believe a coaching program with a group dynamic will most likely enable or facilitate the lawyers to keep up their client development efforts, even when they are not seeing immediate results.

When I coach a group of lawyers in a firm, we set a group goal and decide on 25 action items to achieve the goal. Each member of the coaching group sets individual goals and prepares a plan to achieve them. Members of the group share their plans with me and in some cases with the other members of the group. Each month, each member of the coaching group reports on what he or she has done that month. Some firms put the reports on a coaching group portal and other firms send an email with the photo of each person in the group and his or her report by the photo. The groups of lawyers I have coached have done extremely well with this approach. I believe your firm's lawyers will also do well.

I give the lawyers copies of articles I have written and encourage them to subscribe to my blog. The firms frequently buy copies of my books for each of the lawyers in the coaching program. From the beginning I work on developing a personal relationship with each lawyer I am coaching. I want to know about his or her family, interests outside of work, and what motivates him or her. I need that kind of relationship to have a better idea of what buttons to push to best enable the lawyer to achieve more success.

Some Coaching Tips

In your firm, you will want your senior lawyers to share their ideas and to develop a personal relationship with the junior lawyers. I would even encourage you to know the personality types of the young lawyers in your coaching program. I would encourage you to:

- Have both group coaching and individual coaching;
- Have the coaching group set a group goal;
- Have the group agree on 25 action items to achieve their group goal;
- Encourage each person to set his or her own goals and create a business plan;
- Encourage each member of the group to share his or her client development plans;
- Have each member of the group report monthly what client development activities he or she has done, and publish the reports;
- Have your coaches build a personal relationship with each lawyer, which is so important; and
- Have your senior rainmakers share their experiences.

The suggestions above are based on my own experience, working with hundreds of younger lawyers, and the scientific studies on what is most likely to encourage people to make changes, take actions on client development, work together as a team, and have fun in the process. Why do these suggestions work? In large part it has to do with some principles of group dynamics and the psychology of persuasion.

Selecting The Best Lawyers To Participate

What is the single most important attribute of lawyers who will be most successful in your client development coaching program? I know from experience that more than anything else it is the burning desire to learn and become a better lawyer. Do not go to practice group leaders or office managing partners and ask them to nominate associates or partners who they think "need" coaching. Those lawyers typically get the least from the program because they do not have a growth mindset.

Carol Dweck is a world-renowned Stanford University psychologist. She has done decades of research on achievement and success. In her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success,* she focuses on two mindsets: a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. Those with the growth mindset are the most anxious to learn, they measure their success by whether they are progressing and getting better. The lawyers you select for the coaching program who will get the most out of it are those who are not content with what they have achieved or learned. They do not waste time proving how good they are or get stressed about comparing themselves to others. Instead, they have a passion for learning, believe success is about learning, and they are open to getting help from their coach. The lawyers who have a fixed mindset typically will not change and will give up just as soon as they do not see immediate results from their efforts.

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USING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSUASION IN YOUR COACHING PROGRAM • In his well known book, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion,* Robert B. Cialdini outlines the six principles of persuasion. They are:

- Reciprocation;
- Commitment/Consistency;
- Authority;
- Social Validation;
- Scarcity;
- Liking/Friendship.

I apply all these principles in the coaching process and I encourage you to do so also. Each of them helps create incentives for lawyers to make business development a regular part of their careers.

Reciprocation

The principle of reciprocation is that people are more likely to respond to people who have given them something. The firms for whom I work are giving the lawyers in the coaching group an opportunity to learn client development skills. I believe the lawyers who participate are way more likely to give something back to the firm as a result. Many lawyers I have coached teach other lawyers in their firm what they have learned in the coaching program.

Commitment/Consistency

The principle of commitment and consistency is extremely important in the coaching process. Studies show that when we set goals, write them down, establish a date to complete them, and share all of this with another person, we are way more likely to actually do what it takes to achieve the goals. We want our actions to be consistent with the commitments we have made. This principle is most powerful when we create the commitment ourselves rather than having someone else dictate the commitment to us.

Each of the lawyers I am coaching must make commitments and hold himself or herself accountable. I am also there to help hold them accountable and there is the less obvious accountability to the team. The principle is also more powerful when we make a commitment to a team goal and team action items. In that case we do not want to let the team down.

Authority

The principle of authority is that we are more willing to follow the directions or recommendations from someone we perceive to be an expert. To successfully coach a group I must not only demonstrate that I have been a successful rainmaker myself, I must also show that I know how lawyers with different practice areas, or different personality types can also be rainmakers. I do this by showing actual examples of what I have done and what lawyers I have coached or mentored in other practice areas have done.

Social Validation

The next principle is called social validation. This one is extremely important in a variety of ways. First, we are way more likely to take action when we see others, especially those who are similar to us, taking the same action. Coaching a group is more effective, for example, when the members of the coaching group are at a similar stage of their careers. That is the first step in applying the social validation principle. Next, group members must report their client development activities each month. Those reports are collected and distributed to the entire group. Studies show that new insights are most useful when they are generated from within and not given to the individuals as conclusions. For that reason, I do not participate in the monthly group meetings. Typically two of the lawyers in the coaching group are responsible for the meetings, including deciding on an agenda. When the lawyers in the group are learning from each other and are responsible for helping each other, then the learning experience is more powerful.

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Scarcity

The principle of scarcity works if the coaching program is promoted in a way that lawyers in the firm want to be part of it. This principle works particularly well if the first coaching group has been visibly successful in the firm. Some firms have lawyers apply to be part of the coaching program. The lawyers in one of the firms I am coaching actually pay for the coaching themselves. Needless to say that group is motivated to take advantage of the program.

Liking/Friendship

We most prefer to say yes to people we know and like. In the book, Cialdini discusses Tupperware parties as the clearest illustration of this concept. He notes that most people buy the Tupperware not because they like it or need it, but rather because they like the party hostess. Cialdini states: "The strength of that social bond is twice as likely to determine product purchase as is the preference for the product itself." In the coaching program, I build a personal relationship with the lawyers I am coaching. I bring my wife Nancy to one of the group dinners so each lawyer gets to know her and she gets to know them. The liking factor also applies to the lawyers in the coaching group themselves. That is one of the reasons for the quarterly group meetings, including the dinner. Lawyers from different practice groups and offices, who may barely know each other at the beginning of the program become close friends and colleagues. They make some of the group client development efforts because they like and care about each other. One of the lawyers I coached described that she had developed life-long relationships with the lawyers from different offices and different practice groups who she barely knew at the beginning of the program.

ADVICE FROM A LAWYER WHO HAS BEEN IN A COACHING PROGRAM • Jennifer is a young partner I coached a few years ago. I asked her to describe to the lawyers in another firm who were just starting the coaching program how to get the most out of it. Her thoughts capture some of the principles discussed above:

- "Consider your participation in the program a gift/an extra benefit the firm is offering that you should squeeze the most out of that you can";
- "Open up, don't be ashamed of where you are or what you think your limitations are, let Cordell get to know you";
- "Participate in all parts of the program, even when you don't really understand how they could benefit you";
- "Do something every day, even if it's small, that helps you reach the goals you set";
- "Don't get discouraged, seeds take time to grow";
- "Share what you learn with others in the firm, particularly newer lawyers";
- "Have someone keep you accountable (either Cordell or someone else in the group)"; and
- "Have fun. The relationships you build in the program with other lawyers in your firm will be invaluable as you move forward in your career. They will raise the level of your personal fulfillment and of your professional commitment. They will be life-long friends."

CONCLUSION • The associates in your firm come to a point in time when their ability to produce good work is not enough for them to have a successful and fulfilling career. While they want to become successful at developing business, the transition from focusing on getting hours to focusing on getting clients is daunting. Although client development training may be motivational and informative, it by itself will not likely result in changing behavior. If you couple the training with a group and individual coaching program that creates a team dynamic for accountability, the lawyers in your program will be far more likely to implement what they have learned. I have witnessed great progress by eager young lawyers and you will also.