



Once upon a time there was a Princess in a Corporate Law department who was being pursued by an evil ogre and a wicked witch. The ogre was a new General Counsel who wanted to replace her with one of his own people. And the witch was a subordinate who wanted to dance on her grave. Just when the Princess was tied to the railroad tracks with the train approaching, she was saved by the Good Witch of the Executive Wing (the administrative assistant to the CEO), who had shared many a latte with the Princess and thought she was being shafted. The good witch got her in to see the CEO where Princess pitched a transfer to a sister company. And she lived happily ever after.

## It's the People, Stupid

BY JANICE HANDLER

In teaching Corporate Counseling at a New York Law School, I lure my burned out students to the last class by telling them that I will share with them my most important piece of advice for in-house counsel. They probably expect some esoteric trick for balancing department budgets or getting litigation done in house. Instead, what I write on the blackboard as the last and most important thought I want to share with them is “It’s the people, Stupid.”

When I was a young lawyer, I thought that giving timely and well-informed advice in a straightforward manner was the ticket to success. I still think that’s true. But now I know that the ticket needs punching by a number of people you meet along the way.

“Ah yes,” you are thinking, “she’s talking about networking.” I am not talking about networking—at least not the concept of networking so often touted to job seekers and job doers. You know, the one that promotes superficially cultivating business contacts in the hope they will be useful to you later. I am not talking about papering each cocktail party with your business cards, sending mass sharing and caring emails to everyone on your rolodex, or asking someone high level in your company if he’d like to be your mentor. I am talking about building real and lasting business relationships the old fashioned way—by earning them. And how do you do this? Some ways I have learned:

### Tamp down your twinkle and let other stars shine.

Make your colleagues look good, and you will also look good—in addition to winning their long-term loyalty. If you participated with your head of operations in a successful negotiation, let her be the one to tell the CEO about it. Don’t be so fast to hit “reply all” on every email. Be

generous in ghostwriting for others (lawyers usually write better than their business colleagues). And restrain your impulse to shout “Teacher, Teacher, call on me.” Yes, it got you through three years of law school, but Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.

### The long term relationship is more important than any single victory.

You don’t have to be right (let alone let everyone know you are right) every single time. If it’s not going to get someone carted off in handcuffs, let it go once in a while. In a corporate environment you live with your clients a long time, and sometimes it’s better to bend.

### Be Nice to Everyone—Always.

If this is as obvious as it sounds, how come so many lawyers approach other people as if the people were nails and the lawyer a hammer? If this sounds like you, and you are rationalizing that “This is the way lawyers are,” think of your last interaction with your boss. If the word “suck up” comes to mind, you know how to be nice when you want to.

### Double that for admins.

Be nicer than nice to those worthies we used to call secretaries—not because they can get you in to see their bosses (though it’s nice if that happens) —but because they are the beleaguered, underappreciated whiz kids who are actually running the business—or would be if they didn’t have to be home by 5 PM to get their three year-olds out of day care.

### You will never hate anyone who you break bread with.

(Or anyone you watched run the marathon or whose daughter you bought Girl Scout cookies from). Unlike outside lawyers, an in-house lawyer will often find that her biggest adversaries are her own clients (many of whom have agendas that don’t go further than the next quarter). You can ameliorate these conflicts by “wasting” the time it takes to get to know your co-workers. Power off Westlaw and go out to lunch.

These suggestions will smooth the path of lawyering in business. But they do more than that. There is a magic to relationship building, and it is this: After many years of cultivating relationships in order to achieve success in your work, you will one day discover that the relationships are the success in your work, that the drinks after work, the high fives on completing a deal, and the small talk about children were the places where the joy came in. It’s the People, Stupid. 