Focusing on the Long Game

Tips and perspectives on raising “baby lawyers”

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h, the “baby lawyer”—a special beast we all know well, for we were all baby attorneys at some point, yes? So eager and excited to begin practice. Stumbling around, just trying to figure out where the walls were. Working hard to impress those around us—bosses, colleagues, clients.

Then, suddenly, we woke up and realized we had made it to the other side. Feeling much more confident in our decisions. Having a firmer grasp on what we didn’t know and knowing exactly where to go for the answer. Developing relationships with clients and advisors and becoming busier and busier as a result. And then, for many of us, it set in: the realization that we needed help.

What to do? Hire someone with experience? Someone who can jump right in without any handholding? Someone who’s probably a bit more ... expensive? Or, take a chance on a “baby?” Someone straight out of school, with no real experience to speak of but eager to learn and smart and motivated.

We think the latter option is often the better one, if you’re willing to put in the work. Look at the bigger picture. And, focus on the long game. Our firm employs both seasoned and newly licensed attorneys. Marvin founded the firm almost 40 years ago, and Kelsey joined the firm about five years ago and is a “home-grown” attorney. Here are our thoughts on raising baby lawyers.

So Fresh and So Green

Kelsey: When I first joined the firm, I was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, excited to do some estate planning. I knew it would be a good fit for my personality (no fighting—yay!), and I figured out that it would give me a better work-life balance than the jobs many of my friends were walking into (it has). But, I was pretty much clueless about the technical aspects of trusts and estates. Of course, I’d taken the classes in law school. I’d enjoyed them and done well, but nothing can really prepare you for the practice of law. You just have to jump in and know when to ask for help, which I did a lot of, especially in those early days. One of my colleagues probably should have made a recording that asked, “What does the trust agreement say?” in response to about 90 percent of my questions. I learned so much. For years I’ve said that I must have learned more in those first six months than anyone else I graduated law school with. I’m sure that’s not the case, but it sure felt that way.

Marvin: The learning curve in law practice is pretty steep, especially in estate planning. The tax laws are constantly changing. We’re dealing with increased exemptions, shifting priorities and more and more multijurisdictional matters. Frankly, as a result, it can be tempting to hire someone who can hit the ground running. In some situations, that does make the most sense, but, sometimes, a brand new lawyer can be a great fit. She doesn’t know anything yet, so everything she learns is by your hand. How you do things, why you do things—it all becomes ingrained in her before she’s had a chance to pick up bad habits elsewhere. Yes, it does take a while for her to become self-sufficient. There’s a lot of patience involved, and there are certainly times when it would have been easier to do the project yourself. But, in the long run, you can help shape that person into someone really special, someone who buys into your firm’s way of doing things and knows exactly why she does things the way she does.

Marvin E. Blum is founder of the Blum Firm, P.C. in Forth Worth, Texas, and Kelsey A. Brock is an associate in the firm’s Dallas office.
Best Ticket in the House

Kelsey: If I had to pinpoint the one thing that’s helped me grow the most, it’s sitting in on client meetings and phone calls with the partners. It’s hard to articulate how beneficial it is to hear a partner explain certain concepts to clients over and over again and to hear how recommendations change in various situations. Not only did this help me to learn the concepts better but also to see how to translate very technical matters into manageable pieces that the clients could easily understand. That early and consistent client interaction sort of acted like training wheels. Soon, I had the confidence to start handling signings, and then even some meetings, by myself. I’m certain that it helped me transition into (relative) independence faster than I would have if I’d been sitting on the sidelines silently observing, waiting until I thought I was ready for client interaction.

Marvin: When we decided to have associates start sitting in on client meetings with the partners, we were a little nervous that we would get pushback. After all, we know that nobody likes to see multiple lawyers walk into a room. You can practically see the dollar signs in their eyes. But, we’ve actually had very few clients take issue with this approach. I think this is because we explain to them right off the bat that we work in teams and that it’s actually much more efficient to have the associate in on the initial meeting or call. Not only can she take much better notes than I can (since I’m doing most of the talking), but also she walks out of the room knowing all of the facts and exactly what she needs to do to get the ball rolling. I think the clients appreciate knowing that they have at least two people they can reach if they have a question. They’re much more likely to reach out to the associate directly going forward, which is, of course, very efficient from a billing perspective. Because the associate is generally the one closest to the project, she can run with it and just go to the partner as needed.

Doors Wide Open

Kelsey: Another thing I’ve appreciated about the firm is that it truly has an open-door policy. I know many places say that, but in comparing notes with some of my other lawyer friends, I think it’s pretty rare in practice. We truly do pop in and out of each other’s offices all day. We buzz each other with quick questions, and we frequently send out “has anyone ever encountered ___?” emails. Of course, this is great from a technical perspective. It’s invaluable to have a wealth of knowledge around you from which to harvest information. But, it wouldn’t work if people weren’t on board with the concept itself. Feeling comfortable in your environment and knowing that questions aren’t just accepted but welcomed—that’s a really easy way to help each other grow, regardless of whether you’re a baby lawyer or a seasoned veteran.

Marvin: The open-door concept is great in theory, but nobody wants to use it if they don’t get along with the person on the other side of that door. First and foremost, we’ve approached this issue by being very protective of our culture. If you hire only those people with whom you want to chat, you’ll never hesitate to stop by their office and ask them a question. We also try to foster this atmosphere of collaboration through weekly lunch-and-learns. Sometimes, outside advisors will come in and educate us on a particular planning technique or on their business. But, often we use these lunches to discuss recent CLEs we’ve attended, recent case law or even just ideas we want to bounce off each other. Sometimes we’ll even have some of our newer attorneys present on a topic, be it the President’s revenue proposals or some newly released regulations. It’s educational for the rest of the firm, and it gives that new attorney time to shine too.

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Kelsey: I think I attended a CLE event on my second day at the firm. I have absolutely no memory of what it was about, but I remember where it was and which
attorneys went with me. It became clear to me early on that continuing education (and other similar events) were very important to my firm and to my personal growth as an attorney. At first, I thought it was mostly about the networking. Of course, we want to be on the forefront of people’s minds when they need any estate-planning work. But, as I started to understand more and more of the technical matters being discussed at these events, I realized that the educational piece was even more critical. The law in this area changes rapidly, and it’s really important that we never be behind the eight ball on those changes. I’m fortunate to be a part of an estate-plan-

A Deep Dive

**Spotlight**

Cruising Down the River by Ann Chernow sold for $3,750 at Doyle's Fine Paintings auction on Oct. 10, 2018 in New York City. Chernow's affinity for the arts led her to create works based on specific impressions related to movies from the 1930s and 1940s. She preferred to focus on the women quickly passed by the camera rather than on the leading stars.

we're giving up some billable hours in the short term, but we think the end result—more educated, better connected lawyers—makes this particular sacrifice a no-brainer.

No Pressure, Man

Kelsey: When I was interviewing with the firm, one of the first questions I asked was about business development. I can't express how relieved I was when they assured me that I would have no such requirement. I dreaded the thought of schmoozing. It's just not my gift. Of course, now that I've been practicing for a few years, I see that there are actually lots of ways to develop business without even trying. Part of this has to do with regularly attending CLEs and other similar events and developing a network of people through that. But, part of it also just comes naturally through the day-to-day grind. When I work with a client or an advisor and he's happy with the work, he gives my name to other people. It really is that simple and happens organically like that all of the time. But, that kind of thing didn't happen right away. There's also a certain self-assurance that's required before other people will have confidence in you, and, at least in my experience, that isn't formed overnight. So, it was very beneficial for me to have the space to grow as

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Marvin: We know that many firms stress the billable hour, and we get it. It's how we get paid, and, for many attorneys, it can leave no time for non-billable activities such as CLEs. You can just get those during your birth month by watching videos. But, I firmly believe that those non-billable CLEs are invaluable. Not only are they a very efficient way for our attorneys to keep up with changes in the law, but also they're where many of them develop their professional networks. Because of this, we've set a relatively low billable-hour requirement for our associates to allow them the freedom to attend as many as they desire. They also have an (almost) unlimited budget to attend these types of events. We know that
an attorney without the simultaneous requirement to bring in business.

Marvin: Our firm is in that sweet spot where we're large enough to have attorneys with varied aptitudes, but we're also small enough that we can tailor certain arrangements to best fit the needs and desires of each individual. So, if we have a partner who's so busy bringing in business that he no longer has time to draft, then we think that partner should be incentivized to develop business. Likewise, if we have a partner who doesn't care about bringing in business but really enjoys drafting or putting a second set of eyes on another attorney's work, that partner should be incentivized to do that type of work. These varying arrangements also solve an age-old issue for law firms: attorneys who are possessive of their work (and the origination) that they don't want anyone else to work on the project. When you have several attorneys with different niches and they all fit together harmoniously, there's no reason not to structure things differently for different attorney proficiencies. And, there's nothing to say that those proficiencies won't change over time. If they do, we'll simply change the attorney's structure to continue to reward what she's doing well.

The Longest Game

In the end, we believe that incorporating a few very simple principles can turn a law firm practice into an ideal setting for a baby attorney. There will certainly still be growing pains, and there might be days when you wish you'd hired that second-year litigator who at least knew how to keep his time. But, then you'll remember the opportunity you have: to mold and shape this new attorney into a trusts and estates machine who will, one day, be able to run with things from start to finish, freeing you to do whatever your strength might be. You're a planner, after all. Are you thinking about the long game?