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Rainmaker Q&A: White And Williams' John McCarrick

Law360, New York (August 13, 2013, 12:55 PM ET) -- John F. McCarrick is a partner in White and Williams LLP's New York office and chairman of the firm's directors and officers group. He works with professional liability insurers, reinsurers and insurance brokers on complex D&O and financial institutions claims, compliance and governance issues, and business transactions. In 2012, McCarrick represented an insurer in coverage litigation arising from a financial fraud at a public company. His work resulted in an important win for his insurer client by defeating the policyholder's claim of bad faith by the insurer.

McCarrick also gives back to the community through several annual insurance industry charitable events he developed. He is also actively involved in Grateful Nation Montana, which provides college scholarships and education outreach for families of Montana soldiers killed in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Q: How did you become a rainmaker?

A: Being unusually ill-informed was my path to rainmaking. My siblings and I were the first generation to attend college — never mind graduate school. My dad emigrated to America from Ireland in the 1950s and mom was born in the States, but spent several years living in Ireland. Everything my siblings and I learned about a professional environment was the result of observing others or our own trial-and-error experiences. Watching how hard my parents worked, I wanted to push myself in all I did.

After law school, I joined a New York City law firm handling litigation and insurance coverage matters. I had no expectations about being an associate, or how new client business was generated. This was quite liberating, I later reflected, because no one told me I couldn't develop business as a mid-level associate. Due to my work ethic, it never occurred to me that I should wait until I was a partner before bringing in business.

The best lesson I ever learned about being an effective lawyer and rainmaker came in a completely unexpected form: the often-thankless responsibility of handling a small personal legal matter for a senior partner. The senior partner's car was damaged in a parking garage. The car repair cost $1,600 but the parking garage only reimbursed him $600. As a junior lawyer, I was instructed to recover the entire $1,600 from the parking garage. After the usual unproductive back-and-forth discussions, I drafted a summons and complaint, filed it and mailed a courtesy copy to the legal counsel for the parking garage with a cover letter. The legal counsel immediately called and questioned why I had invested $1,600 worth of legal work in a case worth only $1,600. I pointed the legal counsel to my cover letter that listed all the names of the lawyers in the firm. I showed him the senior partner's name at the top of the first column and then my name near the bottom of the last column. He immediately understood and agreed to pay the $1,600.

The invaluable lesson I learned from this experience is that the most effective legal advocacy comes from converting your adversary over to your reality. Over the years, that experience has proven useful again and again, both in negotiating settlements and in encouraging client prospects to invest their confidence in my team and me.

Q: How do you stay a rainmaker?

A: I have always gravitated to smart people who have a passion for their business. As a mid-level associate, I became friends with two men the same age as me. They worked in the insurance industry with similar levels of enthusiasm and curiosity about the factors driving the growth and development of the industry. Their business charisma was palpable and infectious, and we all became close friends. Today, one is the CEO of a multibillion-dollar specialty insurer and the other is a senior executive at a large personal lines insurer. I never sought them out as friends because I thought they would be in the jobs they have now; but it isn't surprising that people with a high level of passion and interest in their business would rise to the top of an organization.

Perhaps it's the insecurity of my immigrant roots, but I never assume I know enough about the areas impacting my law practice. I'm constantly interested in learning and expanding my breadth of knowledge, whether from reading or through interactions with others. Those around me see that I'm intellectually engaged in the things they care about, and want to work with me. Above a modest level of business, though, it's incredibly difficult to maintain and grow client relationships without a high-performing team of lawyers and staff who share goals and work quality standards.

One way to showcase how a rainmaker can stay relevant is with one of my best client relationships — a Bermuda insurer that sends us their most interesting and challenging cases. Based on referrals from the Bermuda insurer, the sister U.S.-based insurer approached us and began sending us their work. Due to our expanded relationship, this insurer now sends work directly to a variety of attorneys in different practice areas in my firm. Clients trust that I will tell them if we don't have depth in a particular area of law. If we do have depth, I always encourage clients to use my terrific colleagues.

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring rainmaker?

A: Don't mimic anyone else's style or personality when it comes to rainmaking. If you have the ability to get other people excited and interested in what you care about, you have all the basic tools needed to start building a practice. If you can match those basic tools with a reputation for integrity, consistency and hard work, you're well on your way to being a rainmaker. By the way, don't forget to say "thank you” to clients. If you appreciate their support, it’s a good habit to continue to tell them so.

Q: Tell us a tale of landing a big client.

A: My friend Don Bailey was a senior executive in a nonclient company with employees working in the South Tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11. During the days following the attack, Don and I arranged to relocate about 30 members of his team to my firm’s office in Westchester County, N.Y. The first days after 9/11 were the worst as some of his employees had perished and others who escaped from the buildings were bandaged and traumatized. For many, returning to work at my office was the first time the staff had been reunited since the morning of the attack. It was a difficult and emotional time for all involved.

For several weeks, we shared office space; doubling and tripling up our attorneys and Don’s team in offices and conference rooms to maximize space in a way that preserved client confidentiality. My firm supplied the office equipment and arranged for grief counselors to come in and meet with those in need. To lift spirits, my wife and children regularly delivered sandwiches and brownies.

Over that period of time, Don and I became close friends. He and I later became collaborators on industry charitable events, including the annual Statesman Dinner — which has raised more than $500,000 for charities. Due in part to our shared experience, he became a major client and supporter.

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