“Getting along with EVERYONE all the time is impossible, isn’t it? And boy, is it time consuming! And I’m not very good at it. I hate feeling like a schmoozer. I’ve just got too much to do; I can’t stop to make small talk with everybody.”

The statement above is not a direct quote. It is a synthesis of commentary we’ve heard over the years from lawyers in firms in the United States and around the world. Many lawyers are not naturally social animals and may not instinctively understand the importance of building relationships and making friends in the firm.

According to surveys conducted by Altman Weil, one of the leading management consultants to law firms in this country, lawyers fall only in the 12th percentile for those in need of sociability. Contrast this with persons falling in the 90th percentile who often go into sales. Given this statistic, is it even possible for you to care about connecting with colleagues in the firm? When is there time to worry about things like relationships when projects have to be completed and deadlines are looming?

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Why should you care about professional connections and why are the authors beginning a book on associate success with this concept? There is one paramount reason. The authors are convinced that your ultimate success, however you define it in your career and personal life, is dependent upon the quality of the relationships you build and sustain. Period.

The answer to the questions, “Can I get along?” and “Should I try to get along with everyone in my law firm?” is a resounding YES! You should not expect to be everybody’s friend. Friendship is a special relationship of choice. It requires mutuality of interest and desire. But it is possible to get along with everyone, if—and this is critical—now you understand that the key to getting along is understanding the nature of your relationship, the expectations and realistic boundaries that naturally exist or must be erected in order to avoid conflict and advance your agendas.

In this chapter and throughout this book, we are going to analyze the law firm hierarchy and its relationship to your behavior towards others. We will review the impact of key law firm relationships: finding mentors, securing allies, and avoiding making enemies.

This discussion will demonstrate the need for professional connections through effective communications with colleagues, if you want to succeed. Additional chapters in the book will delve more deeply into how to achieve these relationships day in and day out inside the firm and in your personal life. But first, to understand the challenge, let’s look at some typical issues that lawyers must face in law firms every day. See if you identify yourself in the descriptions that follow.

**TYPICAL ISSUES FACING ASSOCIATES**

- **Fear of being incompetent and fear of failure.** The moment you become an associate, your status changes from being a successful law student who has mastered rules of success in the law school to being the new kid on the block. The academic game is over. You have won that coveted position in the law firm you dreamed about with a salary that inspires your ambition to excel and meet every supervising attorney’s ex-
pectation—or at least get you out of debt. Soon, however, you realize that everyone is smart and it is a whole new ball game. You are unsure of the rules for success in this new game, but you know that the stakes are high. Each perceived mistake or misstep is magnified in your mind. You may begin to doubt if you can ever succeed as a lawyer.

► **Inadequate or no feedback on your performance.** Once you have been working hard for a few months and have drafted and submitted memos, briefs, and other documents, you realize that you are not sure how to tell if what you have done is excellent, good, or even adequate. You do not know how to get the feedback you so desperately want and were accustomed to in law school and during all your educational experiences. You may feel foolish or perhaps just awkward asking about your performance. This lack of feedback only reinforces the fears of incompetence or failure.

► **Concern that I am falling behind.** As more time passes you perceive that other associates are being assigned to better projects or cases. You wonder how or why you were not asked to work on those projects or for those senior attorneys. You ask yourself, What are they doing that I am not? You may believe that you are smarter and are working harder than any one of them, and yet they seem to be rising faster in visibility and responsibility.

► **Problems getting staff to prioritize your work and get it done.** Even if you are busy, productive, and feeling valued, you cannot seem to get staff to give your work the priority you believe it deserves. You do not know how to motivate secretaries, word processors, paralegals, and others you need to meet the deadlines of partners who are breathing down your neck. You may have let your frustration express itself in inappropriate expressions of anger or behavior toward staff. Perhaps you are wondering if the solution is sweet talk or even flowers?

► **Working with difficult supervisors.** It seems that you and a certain supervising attorney just are not compatible, yet it appears you are stuck with the relationship and simply must
swallow hard when enduring a tirade. How do you request to be reassigned? And if you are, will it be interpreted that you’re the one with issues?

- **Dealing with negative feedback.** Your annual written review revealed disappointments from senior attorneys that were never expressed while engaged on their projects. How do you now approach the evaluators to clear up any miscommunications and get back on track? And why didn’t he or she let you know when this happened instead of your learning about it months later?

- **Needing to change sections or practice groups.** You decide that you do not want to stay in your current practice group either because of the people or the substantive practice area. You want to move to another practice group. There is a problem. Your section head really despises the head of the preferred practice group. How can you explain your desire to change without insulting your current boss and inciting his or her ire regarding the other attorney?

Does any of this sound familiar? If you have not experienced these situations, the odds are you will. In the chapters that follow, we will address these, along with any of a number of other challenges where understanding the terrain in which you operate and the rules of engagement are critical to success.

Let’s look at what we call the “terrain”—the law firm hierarchy.

### LAW FIRM HIERARCHY AND ROLES

One look at most law firm telephone sheets or websites is often enough to tell how employees are segregated by titles.

**Partners:** (equity and non-equity or senior or junior) sit at the top of the pyramid. They control projects, allocate work, hire and promote or fire everyone else. They generally rose to partnership in their current firm or were hired laterally and can be considered the survivors of the law firm competition. In today’s competitive market, partners are expected in most firms to continue to be productive and to bill hours, manage clients and projects, and carry their share of administrative duties as long as they remain in the firm.
The days of Friday golf games, long business development lunches and slowing down at age 50, if there ever were such days, are long passed. It is important for you to understand this dynamic because the stresses that partners face are very real and do impact how they relate to associates. If you are the associate who helps the partner accomplish his or her goals, that relieves some of the stress, you will be rewarded. If you are perceived as an associate who adds to the partner’s stress by failing to meet deadlines or expectations or producing poor quality work, the natural inclination of the partner will be to cease to work with you and probably tell others of their bad experiences. Your success depends upon understanding this fundamental concept.

Of Counsel, Senior Counsel, Senior Associates, Etc: Many law firms have various non-partner categories for more senior lawyers. These positions may or may not lead to partnership consideration. Of Counsel attorneys are sometimes lateral hires who are on a short tract of one or two years for consideration for partnership. Sometimes senior partners convert their status to Of Counsel as they wind down towards retirement. Sometimes associates who do not make partner in the normal course of time but who are considered valuable to the firm are given status as Of Counsel or Senior Counsel or Senior Associate. These designations for former associates may or may not lead to reconsideration for partnership. In any event, you should never assume that these non-partner lawyers are unimportant to your potential success in the firm. The partners will value their opinions of you, your work and your attitude.

Associates (Senior, Mid-level and Junior): Much like the difference between the first-year law students and graduating law students, associates are expected to develop expertise and take on increasing responsibility as they mature and gain experience. You must remember that those associates a few years ahead of you could be partners when you are being considered for advancement. They certainly will be evaluating you and your work product and their opinions matter to the partners, especially when they are often the ones in the trenches with you on projects, working side by side or reviewing and revising your work before it even goes to a partner. If you can help the more senior associates accomplish their responsibilities, you will find that they will come back to you time and again
and you will become a member of a team that gets assigned to projects on the basis of past success.

**Staff Attorneys:** Many law firms are hiring staff or contract attorneys to add bodies to do more routine legal work such as review of document production in major litigation or due diligence review in large commercial transactions. On some occasions, such lawyers may perform at such a high level that they are offered permanent associate positions or perhaps they are given permanent positions that are non-partnership track. If these attorneys are perceived as performing at a higher level than you are on a project, that will not bode well for you at feedback time.

**Part-time or flex-time Lawyers:** Increasingly firms are offering alternative working arrangements, especially to address issues of child raising. Consideration of these options may be one choice you make as you seek the right balance in your personal life. The possibility of such an option is certainly something that you should consider when accepting employment.

**Legal Assistants, Paralegals, and Project Assistants:** As we will discuss more later, these professionals play an extremely important role in the law firm. Many of them have extensive academic and on-the-job training. Failing to recognize this is a big mistake for an associate.

**Legal Secretaries:** In the modern firm where lawyers do more of their own word processing and large pools of word processors are available for large documents, the ratio of lawyers to secretary continues to increase. Secretaries will have assignments for many lawyers or legal assistants. Their jobs have also become more stressful as these responsibilities have increased.

**Word processors, copy and file clerks, librarians, and other support staff:** Access to significant back-up support is a luxury that usually comes with a law firm position. Associates must rely on these resources in order to complete projects and meet deadlines.

At first blush, when you read this list, the hierarchy seems pretty rigid in terms of levels of responsibility and, you might assume, importance. Generally, the higher up you are on this list, the greater
your compensation will be and compensation is one measure of value. It is also true that among groups sometimes a pecking order attitude may develop based upon who works for whom. Vicarious prestige is sometimes acquired by working for a certain high-ranking senior partner, for example.

One of the biggest mistakes associates make is assuming that someone’s title or rank in the firm pecking order should determine how they are treated or their importance to the associate’s success. Yes, partners and more senior lawyers are typically the ones who give out assignments and evaluations, but everyone in the firm is essential to the success of the firm. Ask a senior lawyer if he had to choose between his paralegal or legal secretary of 10 years and a new associate, and he will pick the proven player every time.

Remember the issue we discussed about getting staff to give your work a high priority and help you accomplish your goals? Pay close attention to the following Rules of the Road in law firm relationships.

1. **Treat every employee with dignity, consideration, and respect.** The fact that you have a law degree and someone else may not have completed college only reflects on individual life circumstances. How people perform their job is much more important than honors on a wall. How you are perceived by the staff in a firm says a lot about you as a person. You never know when you may need someone to stay that extra hour, get that package out, find that file, or fix your computer after hours. Build alliances with staff, and you will find that you have better access to the resources you need for success.

2. **A good secretary can make or break you.** As we discussed above, the role of secretaries in firms is becoming increasingly stressful. The days of one lawyer and one secretary are gone. Technology and the quest for high profit margins has moved many firms to implement secretarial pools and/or assign three or more lawyers or legal assistants to one secretary. Too many lawyers think that running through secretaries is a mark of an aggressive, successful lawyer. The reverse is actu-
ally the case. Look at the key partners in firms and you will see that most of them have long-standing relationships with their secretaries that span a number of years. They work as a team and the team runs like a well-oiled machine. Remember, your secretary is often your public face to clients and other lawyers in the firm. How he or she responds to simple questions, such as, “Where is Ms. Smith?” can have a big impact on how you are perceived. Statements such as “She can’t come to the phone now, but I will take a message” are much preferred to ones such as “I have not seen her this morning.”

3. **Staff needs feedback just like you do.** Remember to praise and thank those who assist you, who go the extra mile when a project has to be completed with an impossible deadline. Your positive evaluations by those who assist you, can also lead to raises or good performance reviews, for them and they will remember and appreciate your support. Do not wait for a formal process. When the staff does an outstanding job, tell them and their superiors. Treat staff the way you want to be treated by more senior lawyers in the firm.

4. **No job is too menial for you to do.** Learn how to use the photocopier and where supplies are located. There will be times when you need to know this. Pitch in when needed. Offer to pick up lunch or a cup of coffee for your secretary or a legal assistant from time to time, especially if he or she is doing something extra for you. You will garner the respect and appreciation of everyone, and you will find others much more willing to help you when you need them.

5. **Allies are invested in your success.** Enemies relish your failures. Extra eyes and minds can help insure that mistakes are caught and corrected before they result in severe consequences. If a secretary or staff person recognizes that you have the wrong parties or court listed on a set of documents, a simple question to you can avert disaster. If you have not treated this person well, if you have made an enemy because of a condescending attitude, this person may choose to remain silent. It happens. Don’t let it happen to you.

Now that we understand the terrain and the impact of allies and enemies on success, let’s look at the basic techniques we need to
begin to develop these alliances, these supportive relationships and friendships in the firm.

**HOW CONNECTING WITH COLLEAGUES MAKES YOU MORE SUCCESSFUL**

- A wise associate lawyer knows that the first job is to make anyone he or she works with look good. Put yourself in the more senior lawyer’s shoes. From that perspective, what would you want from an associate attorney? Your answer will motivate you to be the kind of associate they want to work with, the “go to” associate who is always in demand—but this can backfire—being always in demand—so be sure to read the section on learning to say “no” in Chapter 10. In the process of doing this, there will be an abundance of opportunities to create a highly successful career, however you may define it.

- The law firm environment can be confusing territory, requiring awareness and insight into the most effective ways to observe, contribute, and align with legal activities that serve the daily internal and external client needs. Attorney development often no longer includes the traditional mentor/apprentice relationships so valued in the early years of legal advocacy. Connecting with colleagues means different things to different people: it’s active and passive, explicit and implicit, and subtle and overt. On the road to being effective, visible, and valued permanent members of a legal team, making positive connections with people matters. Navigational tools with all staff, both legal and support, will ease interactions and move your career forward.

- Effective communication is key to legal career success. Communication is as much art as it is science, although we’ve informed our opinions with the study of psychology, neurolinguistic programming, and theories on communication, the brain, personality, and learning styles to help you understand why certain approaches to getting along do or do not work. The goal is to connect, to hear and be heard; to see and be seen; to sense your efforts have mattered as you strive for a sustainable career.
In the face of all of the above, we know you are up to the challenge, but what's the best way to go about it?

**SIX KEY PRINCIPLES THAT HELP**

1. **People listen for their reasons—not yours.** It can come as a shock to any of us that others may see the world differently from our perspectives. Our egocentric assumption is that our lens is the only lens and those who don't share it need to be enlightened. It’s practical and effective to “seek first to understand; then to be understood.” Chapter 5 discusses “Biases, Baggage, and Frames of Reference,” to initiate the understanding of varying personality, cultural, and learning styles.

   To be of service begins with understanding how others define service. How are you being evaluated? What does “really soon” mean to them? What’s an underlying need that you could fill if you only knew what it was? What assumptions have you made about what will make others sleep better at night as a result of your efforts?

2. **People will support what they help create.** Chapter 6 says, “Dialogue, not monologue, creates relationships.” Engaging in conversation, even small talk, is challenging for some personalities. Yet it’s the co-creation of ideas, plans, and possible executions, as well as the basic sharing of information, that engages our human need to connect. It’s rarely a waste of time to ask for other’s advice, or chit-chat about weekend plans, or to meet for lunch or after work just to get to know someone. There is wisdom and skill in creating a team of advisors intent on your professional success.

3. **Everything communicates.** *YOU Are the Message*, by Roger Ailes (Doubleday,1988), reinforces the idea that everything you do and don’t do, say and don’t say, sends some sort of message about you, your abilities, and your potential. “First Impressions Are Lasting Impressions” is the title of Chapter 3 in this Guide, but that’s not to say that second and third impressions don’t count. People can make very superficial assessments of others very quickly by observing body language and listening to vocal tone. With more self-awareness, you
can send the message of your competence and desirability on any legal team.

4. **The message is the message received means perception is reality.** Because we want to be comfortable above all (comfort is the #1 fundamental human need), people make up what they do not understand. In the absence of true information, humans project their fears. It would be quite unusual, though welcomed, if in response to acute tardiness or compulsive interrupting or exhibiting withdrawn behavior, people would assume that you were doing the best you could under circumstances that they were not aware of which must have been impacting your behavior. In reality though, normally in the face of such actions on your part, most people would assume that you suffer from rudeness, insensitivity, or improper social training.

5. **Rapport leads to trust.** Having a harmonious or sympathetic relationship with others is always desirable when hoping to build and maintain successful collegial relationships. Positive rapport creates comfort; negative rapport creates discomfort. One suggestion for building positive rapport—matching and mirroring people physically—which is intuitive and instinctual to some and mystifying and manipulative to others. Chapter 7, “People Like to Do Business with People They Like,” discusses the technique of creating positive rapport with the goal of more deeply understanding comments, behavior, values, and instructions.

6. **Feedback is key.** Chapter 8, “The Importance of Feedback,” compels associates to insist on specific, direct, and yes, even tough feedback that gives direction to their development as lawyers. Shareholders and partners aren’t usually comfortable giving feedback unless it’s laudatory. Asking for feedback usually is not comfortable because of fear of hearing bad news. But even Tiger Woods has a coach, and no classical musician plays as well without a conductor.

We have now explored the terrain of the law firm and looked at common mistakes associates make. We will be introducing you to tools to use as we develop the key relationships we need to survive and thrive in a law firm.
The other unmentioned chapters in this guide are chock full of relevant information that, over time, will make more and more sense. But remember, this is a guide, not dogma. The effectiveness of specific applications and the impact they may have on individual responses and outcomes are not always predictable. There is never only one way to address and overcome the challenges you will face in the law firm environment. But our best professional years have been spent committed to enhancing the effectiveness of attorneys, so keep this guide handy. And so let’s proceed to Chapter 2 and find out “What Lawyers Need.” It may surprise you.