

Parable #2 - The Formula for Success



Advocacy Club Parable #2: The Formula for Success

by John Hollander, 1,400 words

Law school doesn't teach wannabe lawyers much about how to succeed in their chosen profession. They learn 'The Law' and may experience a bit of the Real World in clinical work. They are told to network, but not taught how. Hard work is not enough. Legal talent is not enough. Together, they go a long way to paving a successful career in a big firm, government, or in-house with a corporation. Success in a conventional practice takes more. Much more.

South Park, June 2020

I'm the managing partner of a five-lawyer firm that debuted only a few months ago, less than a year from my call to the Bar. I may be living the dream today, but I sure wasn't a few weeks ago. Not by a long shot.

You see, my firm required a rainmaker, someone to bring in new clients. We were desperate since our biggest client, the City of South Park, abandoned us without warning. A month ago, the Mayor who supported us lost his job in a recall vote. So he was out, and the new Mayor thought – and still thinks - we're toxic. That, plus we had taken up the cause of clients who have challenged East Coast Properties, the developer who orchestrated the new guy's coronation and now owns him.

While my area of practice is business law, I work with four partners who will run out of work unless I can make something happen. They don't promote. They litigate. It's my job to stir the pot. So, here's the bottom line. Either I bring

new clients to the firm, a recurring source of revenue, or we fail. It's on me, and I've never failed at anything I set my mind to. Never.

To make matters worse, the pandemic shuttered the whole country. To resolve our cash crunch, I had to figure out who needs a commercial lawyer these days, with commerce ground to a halt? How could I exploit this crisis? Turn it to our advantage?

The City's workforce was melting away, with layoffs, work-from-home mandates, and childcare duties. Employers always need affordable and practical legal advice, but now more acutely to cope with this emergency.

Here's the story of how that June day went.

First, I sharpened a wooden *Blackwing 602*, the best pencil ever, and created a list of prospective small-business clients. These all operated within a five-mile radius of our office in Lincoln Ward. It may sound easy now, but it wasn't. Half the local businesses had just closed, more every day, each a tragedy.

List complete, I asked myself what service needs these businesses had in common. That's where I had to focus. I produced several ideas.

Then I called Mary Henry, our law clerk. She has a background in bookkeeping and business law. "Mary, I have a project." I explained my idea.

"What do you need, Suzanne?"

"I want to present local businesses with a package they all need. A policy for employers to deal with COVID. Work from home, quarantine, layoff notices, accommodation, customer demands, distribution issues, that kind of thing."

"Where do we start?"

“Let’s put a proposal together so we can promote it tomorrow.”

That afternoon, we created the plan. By evening, it was ready for market. From zero to sellable in a day. We were ready to rumble, at least until reality hit us in the face with a wet fish.

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The following day, I called a garage owner who sends his kids to the daycare we kept open despite East Coast’s efforts to shut it down. He knows us.

“Bert? It’s Suzanne Lapointe. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, Suzanne.”

“I’ve put together a package of services to get you through the crisis.” I explain what’s on offer.

“No good, Suzanne. Nothing can get me through this. I’m closing my doors next week. I can’t make it through the week, let alone the season.” Ooops. My plan wasn’t going to fly, not with Bert’s garage anyway.

“What do you need?” My real question was, what can I salvage from this plan?

“Money. My bank is useless. Lots of forms. They say it’ll take weeks to process.”

“The government has a program to advance money to businesses like yours. Forgivable loans. Could we help make that work for you?”

“Now you’re talking. I can’t even get through on their so-called ‘hotline.’ If you can even get me the promise of money soon, I can hold on for a short while.”

Three other local business owners told me the same thing. They didn't need what I proposed. Maybe later. They needed money to pay their staff and keep the lights on to get them through this mess. So much for my careful planning!

I resolved to redo my proposal to meet the actual need, not the one I had imagined. Then things got worse for me. A phone call interrupted my refocus efforts. Call Display said it was from the insurance company that had us on retainer, one of our first clients and most of our remaining cash flow. The company is the liability insurer of the City, so they act in lockstep. This wasn't good.

"Hi, Suzanne. It's Phil Holbrook. I'm the new claims manager at Great Provident. I started this week."

"Hello, Mr. Holbrook. I'm pleased to meet you. How can I help?"

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news. With the pandemic and all, we must terminate our retainer agreement with your firm. There's a 60-day out provision. You will receive our notice shortly."

Bad, bad news. I could feel the floor shifting beneath my feet. I recall looking down to see if a cavernous abyss had opened under my chair. I tried a Hail Mary pass.

"Is there something we can do to modify the agreement? Maybe switch to another format? Change the fee rates?" Desperate times called for desperate measures.

"No, Suzanne. We'll use a law firm already on retainer with one of our affiliates." He rang off, leaving me to calculate how long it would be before we ran out of cash and needed the same support as the prospective clients.

I called Mary again, but with a renewed urgency. Our runway had just gotten a whole lot shorter. “Get on the federal government website. Check the new programs that help businesses survive this mess. Payroll support. Rent support. Find somebody who will take your calls now and for the next few weeks. I’ll try another angle.”

“OK. What do we do with what we learn from the government?”

“Prepare a checklist for what we can do to get that support for clients. ASAP. I know that you’re qualified as a bookkeeper. Well, now you’re a consultant, too.”

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The next day, Mary reached an overworked, stressed-out civil servant who was desperate to find a solution to her problem, the mirror image of ours. She faced a deluge of claims that she couldn’t process. She welcomed a lawyer who could package the claims in proper form. This filter would free her to manage the approvals without all the time-consuming customer handholding. Time she didn’t have, working from her home-office desk, solo. Mary sealed the deal with her, paperwork, online submissions, and all.

Armed with a solution, I called the businesses on my list. By day’s end, we had five as clients, a sixth who needed approval by their accountant, and a dozen others as ‘maybes.’ I directed Mary, “Post the new services we offer on our website. We’ll get something into the daily newspaper and buy some radio spots.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

Better news followed. Two new clients also had dispute cases and needed advice from a litigator. That’s rainmaking! I added up the fees we could expect.

They bought us precious time, and we were just starting. The light at the end of the tunnel wasn't a freight train heading toward us.

I think back today to what we accomplished that week. What had I learned? That it takes imagination, hard work, and a bit of luck. With all those, good things might happen. In our case, it all came together. That's how to succeed.

This story forms a part of the Advocacy Club Fiction series, featuring short stories and a novel (only Murphy's Law, so far, but a sequel in progress, tentatively titled, The Kitchen Cabinet).