

# **beyond KNOWING**

**16 CAGE-RATTLING QUESTIONS  
TO JUMP-START YOUR PRACTICE TEAM**

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**DEDICATION:**

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This work is dedicated to our loving spouses,  
Monique McKenna, Bethany Marks, and Margaret de Gruchy  
whose support and patience make it all possible;

&

to our most generous mentor

David H. Maister

who continually serves to inspire us;

to our good friend and pathfinder

Bruce W. Marcus

who always challenges us to be ever better;

&

to all those practice leaders everywhere  
who orchestrate exhilarating questions and  
are driven to make a distinctive difference.

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“Break old habits,  
break new ground,  
then break the mold.”

## ARE YOU ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS?

As the story goes, it was a warm spring day in Princeton, New Jersey. One Albert Einstein, who was then working at the Center For Advanced Studies, was found hands clasped behind his back, pacing back and forth, mumbling to himself incoherently. A bystander, curious to discover what it was that Dr. Einstein was so obsessed with, moved discreetly to within hearing range. Lost in thought, Einstein continued to repeat, “If I only had the right question . . . If I only had the right question . . .” To this great thinker, the journey to understanding began not with solutions, but with questions.

Today, our preoccupation with finding answers must not obscure the importance of asking the right questions. In fact, average answers to good questions, more often than not, yield better insights than astounding answers to lousy questions.

Unfortunately, too many partnership and practice group meetings get filled with artery-clogging discussions that do little to help determine how busy professionals are going to invest their precious non-billable time to change their future. Meanwhile, our strategic planning efforts become consumed by uninspiring and overly complicated navel-gazing that often results in little more than a binder full of documents gathering dust on some managing partners’ bookshelf. The idea that rigorous analysis will somehow yield blinding insights is invariably replaced by the creative synthesis of nothing more than “me-too” strategies.

*beyond KNOWING* is not intended to be the latest diagnosis of prevailing market trends or some serious academic tome . . . but rather a collection of unusual, quirky, provocative, and bizarre questions to clear out the cobwebs at your next meeting, jump-start your creative thinking, tickle the brain, launch your partners’ minds moving in productive directions, pop some new ideas out of your intellectual toaster, and get energized to take action.

As you peruse each of our 15 *cage-rattling* questions you will note that they are accompanied by a number of “idea generating thoughts.” These thoughts are not intended to be prescriptive or detract from the question, but designed only to induce further exploration of the topic. Having used these questions to provoke the thinking of partners both at practice group sessions and during firm-wide retreats, we are confident that you will find that the most insightful answers come from your own people.

Indeed, truth be known, our greatest buzz would come from learning that but one of these questions created an unprecedented frenzy of creative thought and resulted in inspired action within your team. And let’s not under-emphasize – our uncompromising, unequivocal point – action is the ultimate acid test.

The quality of the questions asked by any managing partner or practice leader drives the quality of the conversation about the future of the firm and the practice group. You can greatly influence your group’s innovative instincts by asking good questions and then turning your professionals loose to try to find imaginative answers. So . . . let’s start . . . NOW.

“Your job is to  
provide leadership,  
not status-quo-ship!”



## WHAT WOULD YOUR LEADERSHIP EPITAPH BE IF YOU WEREN'T AROUND TOMORROW?

Epitaphs are serious business so you might want to contemplate this one seriously. The essence of this question is to take a good hard look at what your partners are likely to say about you when you are no longer in your position of leadership. What do you want to have remain as your signature, your mark, your legacy?

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

Immediately change your title from Managing Partner, Practice Group Leader, or CEO - to CCA – “Chief Change Agent”!

Raise hell. Communicate to your people about those competitive firms that are doing something to outperform your team. And . . . don't just think in terms of your own profession. Recent research shows that the Fortune 1000 are using, on average, 22.8 different professional service providers of all types – lawyers, accountants, actuarial advisors, consultants, public relations strategists, investment bankers, and so forth. The relevance? You think that clients are comparing you against some other similar firm in your profession. Survey says . . . “Think again!”

Meanwhile, your professionals are like horses with blinders, always focused only on the most immediate client assignment that stares back at them from the top of their desks. It is natural for them to think that they are doing well when they have no idea how others are performing. One of your primary tasks is to be the antenna to the outside world, reporting on best practices in an effort to stimulate your professional's desires to constantly improve.

What are the THREE most important priorities that you are trying to communicate to your partners? (Okay, you may possess an encyclopedic list of things that need your attention, but you had better have only three that have your unwavering commitment).

It is only when you are communicating many times more than you think is necessary that your people are getting the message. When you think you've said the same thing for the 20<sup>th</sup> time, many are only hearing it for the first time. Phrase your messages in vivid, memorable words. Examples, stories, and anecdotes make the point better than abstract talk. Keep it simple. You have got to connect to hearts and heads at the same time. Keep repeating it over and over. Find different mediums (breakfast meetings, e-mail, video briefings) to get your message out. “Here we go again . . .” You will get sick of saying it long before your partners get sick of hearing it.

An effective leader should avoid any “my way or the highway” thinking and behavior.

They are counterproductive and limit the possibilities of discovering new and better ways to accomplish tasks. Beware, your competitors just may relish the opportunity to pick up a few hitchhikers!

□ Be selfish. Never share the blame for your mistakes.

One of the annoying things about having leadership responsibility is the difficulty of finding someone to blame for your problems. And when you do find someone to blame, it is rather remarkable how often that someone's face turns up on your driver's license.

Accept all of the responsibility when things go badly and pass on all the credit and praise when things go well. One managing partner makes it a habit, once every week, to identify someone in the firm who has taken action on something and writes a memo to openly commend that individual. Seriously motivating stuff.

After some years of serving the firm diligently and after dragging many fellow partners kicking and screaming into the new market reality and new ways of practicing, a very tired managing partner decided to step down.

In his first meeting with his eager new successor, he presented the individual with three sealed and numbered envelopes. He told the new leader, "I give you these letters as my parting advice. Open them in order, if and when you find yourself in trouble."

Within a few weeks the new leader was in some despair and so opened the first letter. It said simply: "Blame me." The new managing partner did, the heat was deflected, and all was well.

Before long he was in deep difficulty with a number of the partners. He opened the second letter. It advised: "Blame the economy." He did and this bought him some sympathy and time.

Some months later, the discouraged leader was in major trouble. He opened the third letter. It said: "time to write three letters."

□ Make listening a highly valued attribute of your leadership style.

Take out your calendar and purposely schedule one-on-one time with each member of your team. (You know if you don't schedule it, it won't happen). Open these informal meetings with a general: "What are you working on and is there anything I can do to help?" then really listen to what that partner has to say.

Never interrupt one of your partners when they are speaking, plan what you'll be saying while they are talking, or assume you are listening because you can hear. Make it a habit to paraphrase - repeat back in your own words what your partner has said. Paraphrasing typically begins with "What I hear you saying is . . ." and ends with "Have I got that correct?" Provide active listening skills training to all of the partners in your firm. It is one of the most underutilized skills for most professionals. Focus on setting the listening example. In that way you will EARN the right to be heard by listening to others.

□ Did you observe anything worthy of recognition this week?

We are either net takers (energy vampires) or net contributors (spark plugs) to the energy of others. We need to ask those we are trying to lead or influence about our energy leadership. All too often the way many practice leaders energize others is by leaving the room. There are many factors that mobilize and energize. Some of the most important include appreciation, recognition, thanks, and celebration. We all need to feel like winners.

The validity of providing recognition is accepted and chanted about in internal memos, e-mails and on secret decoder rings. The problem is that nobody really provides any.

Be tacky! Introduce special tokens of appreciation. Print thank yous, note cards, or Post-It notes with a message on the front: Bravo, Attaboy, Round of Applause, Great Stuff, etc. Use them to recognize specific deeds by writing a few specific comments inside and tucking them in places that will surprise the recipients. Think surprise. Fill someone's office with balloons. Spring for a six-foot submarine sandwich as a congratulatory gesture to your team for reaching some small milestone.

A key aspect of rewarding the pursuit of excellence is in acknowledging behavior. But if we only recognize the victorious (that new client brought in) our professionals will tend to be quite conservative in their actions. After all, if only a "win" gains recognition, then people will wait until conditions are most assured for victory. But if you recognize the behavior or the achievement of the first step, even if the victory is not imminent, you demonstrate that efforts are worthy.

But, remember that recognition is not a magic elixir. All of the encouraging words in the world won't fix serious problems and conflicts that are swept under the carpet and never addressed. Tackle the tough stuff, too.

□ When the going gets tough . . . the tough add an element of FUN.

Adjust the atmosphere at your next tense budget meeting, compensation or partnership discussions.

Set out a few jars of jelly beans. Present participants with their own personalized cushions to ease the pain of those long sessions. Switch to scented markers for your flip chart planning. Why work with stinky alcohol-based markers when you could be scrawling away in mint or cherry.

Use humor to dissolve interpersonal tension among partners. One resourceful firm chairman arrived at the meeting with a gingerbread man for each partner and these instructions: "Sometime during this afternoon's meeting, each of you may feel like biting someone's head off. So . . . feel free!"

“Don’t mess  
with your success  
and soon enough  
some competitor will.”

## WHAT THINGS THAT MADE US SUCCESSFUL IN THE PAST DO WE NEED TO FORGET, UNLEARN, OR DISCARD TO BE SUCCESSFUL NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE?

Many of the things that made us successful in the past may now prove to be nothing more than time-worn assumptions about what clients really value, or what services remain worthwhile offering, or what constitutes profitability, or what ensures quality performance.

This question encourages professionals to examine their various personal assumptions to see if they are still viable and addresses one of the most important, yet overlooked, elements of organizational learning -- "unlearning." One of the keys to learning is to know when to erase old tapes. Children are fast learners largely because they do not have to unlearn all of the rubbish that has accumulated in the average adult's brain.

SIGN POSTED ON ONE FIRM'S BULLETIN BOARD:

Any partner who says we deal in facts not fiction, has never read the firm's last strategic plan.

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

Fight to destroy established routines.

Your routines represent all of those memoranda, reports, letters, computer print-outs, and trivia that conspire to sap your leadership strength and smother your ability to direct your attention to those activities that are really the highest value-added use of your time. Routines will get you into ruts, dull your senses, stifle your creativity, constrict your thinking, remove you from real world stimulation and destroy your firm's competitive vitality.

Constantly question "the way things are done," and never, never allow any of your partners to rest on their laurels. ("Are we always going to be one of the leaders in our market?" "Can we count on having that client work for a long time to come?") Some partners can be like those old spring-powered watches . . . they have to be shaken hard to get them going.

Beware one of the fallacies in the mindless espousing of "best practices" -- you can't just be "as good as" the competition . . . that NEVER leads to market leadership. You have to ensure that your people know that they must consistently be better.

□ Strategic blindness comes from too much inbreeding. It results from the same senior partners, having the same conversations, about the same stuff, in the same way, and expecting different insights to emerge.

Innovative insights only emerge from hearing NEW VOICES. Firm's need new voices to hear new strategies.

Diversify the leadership voices available to your firm. Set up your own informal "Advisory Board" comprised of respected community and business leaders who can meet quarterly with the firm's leadership and offer an impartial view. Have them tell you what is going on in their version of the real world.

Ensure that at least one member of your firm's executive committee is 30 years of age or younger. The younger generation has a different model for how they think about things. And if you don't think one of your younger professionals (partner or not) could have some tasty contributions to make participating on the executive committee, you are clearly suffering a bad case of truth decay!

□ There are relatively few critical questions that successful practice leaders need ask of themselves, and ask of all of their partners:

- What are we best at?
- What are we world-class great at?
- What makes us unique?
- How are we going to serve our clients in a way that nobody else can?
- What "wow" new services can we offer?
- What are we going to do that will truly lead the market?

And . . . successful practice leaders don't stop asking these questions and they certainly don't stop even after getting a dignified answer.

The effective practice leader's motto (repeat after us): "We can always do better." Amen.

## **IF OUR MOST DEMANDING CLIENT RAN THIS FIRM, WHAT EXPERIMENTS OR PILOT PROJECTS CONCERNED WITH DOING SOMETHING TOTALLY NEW WOULD THEY HAVE UNDERWAY?**

Do interesting, seriously "cool" ideas - about new services, new approaches, new methods, new niches, new ways to collaborate - bubble up with great regularity from every nook and cranny of your firm? Good enough is never good enough these days, it is only a sure-fire recipe for becoming yesterday's news. (And you know what pet owners do with yesterday's news!)

Innovation is the buzzword of the new millennium, yet few fully understand how to encourage it, let alone repeatedly achieve it at a firm-wide level. Now imagine that your most demanding client has been named the firm's Director of Cool Ideas. What fresh and inventive endeavors would this individual be initiating?

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

What new innovation have you failed with over the last six months and what has it taught you? (And if you can't think of anything that you have failed at, what does that tell you?)

Many firms assume that doing "more of the same" is innovating. It's not. It's simply doing more of the same. Turn your firm into a churning cauldron of interesting, limited-risk, small projects.

Up the ante: Set aside a modest, special budget to fund new experiments, assign one partner to oversee submissions, and get the word out now, that the firm welcomes new project ideas.

CLASSIFIED AD:

Parachute for sale. Only used once. Never opened. Small stain.

Don't avoid mistakes, encourage them. Failure is an event, not a person.

Get your people to do something . . . anything. And if they fall on their face, at least they are moving in the right direction. If professionals aren't failing, they aren't learning. Mistakes are road signs along your journey which read "learning opportunity just ahead."

Get outrageous! Sponsor a "Mistake of the Month Program" to promote the sharing and discussion of mistakes made and what was learned from them. Implement an annual award for "the best idea that didn't work." It is a direct reinforcement from firm leadership that an initiative might not have come to fruition, but the thinking behind it is what the firm needs and values.

“Procrastination  
is the graveyard  
of broken dreams.”



## WHAT ARE THE KEY REASONS WHY OUR GREAT IDEAS FALL APART DURING IMPLEMENTATION?

We all make good faith efforts each January 1<sup>st</sup> to begin our New Year with a clean slate and a desire to move from our current circumstances to a place where we will be more productive, fulfilled, and happier. Most of us have a hundred and one reasons why we have postponed taking any real action. We don't know where to start . . . we don't have enough time . . . we're not sure what specific actions would provide the best results . . . and so forth. The reality is, that if we transferred a bit of the energy we consume in rationalizing our excuses, we could be well along the path to realizing results. If only we could get organized to start on the doing. The gap between knowing and doing is where great ideas are made or lost. The team with the best talent is soon eclipsed by the team with the best implementation. Whatever today's date, become a zealot for getting stuff implemented.

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

□ Think and act like an entrepreneur. The curse of the professional mindset is wanting to make sure that we get it just exactly right. We deliberately consider every alternative, review every possibility, and study every option until we slowly bleed to death for lack of action.

Propose a novel concept to any average group of professionals and what are you likely to hear? Within a nano-second – thirteen reasons what that isn't going to work. Meanwhile that highly successful entrepreneur (that we all admire and seek to serve) when presented with a new idea, asks himself three questions: “How do I make this work?” “What's the worst that could happen if this doesn't work?” and “Where is my back door if the worst thing that could happen, actually happens?” You need to think like this or you're just kidding yourself about implementation.

□ Take small steps. Experience confirms that changing one small thing by itself doesn't make for significant progress. No one ingredient, no matter how tasty will result in an Epicurean delight, but if you purposefully and cumulatively add numerous small ingredients, over time, you will be amazed by the impact. Does every project include a clear step-by-step implementation plan?

□ Challenge the known and embrace the unknown. There is a time in each of our lives when we know enough to be smart, but we don't know enough to be scared. What do you see coming in the future that will change the way your firm practices? What do you and your team plan to do to prepare for those potential events so that you are ready well before they occur?

Share the burden and make others conscious co-conspirators. Set up a task force within your firm charged with helping you monitor the emerging developments affecting the profession. Have your group monitor various industry and professional publications - internationally, clip articles of relevance, note ideas they've heard, collect competitive firm literature, assemble it under appropriate headings, meet for a monthly luncheon, and present you with a one page summary of the most important and interesting developments.

Rotate participation on this task force such that everyone gets the opportunity over time to climb into the crow's nest, peer off into the swirling mists, and attempt to discern what future events will have the greatest impact on your firm. There is a lot of change coming. If we think about it, introducing change and getting projects implemented gets considerably easier when there are a number of partners who have, together, identified the reasoning behind doing things differently.

□ “Momentum” is the Chief Change Agent’s (CCA) best friend. Every leader faces the challenge associated with creating and then sustaining change. Momentum is one of the key factors that separates winning initiatives from those that fall by the wayside. Often, it is the only difference.

Interesting to note: in the average basketball game, when the opposing team scores a lot of unanswered points and starts to develop too much momentum, a good coach will call a time-out. The coach knows that if the other team’s momentum gets too strong, his team is likely to lose.

So as a leader, you can't afford to let down your guard or turn your attention to other matters once a project is launched. You can't delegate (or abdicate) an important initiative. Your hand must ALWAYS be (and be seen to be) on the throttle. When there is momentum within a firm for accomplishing something important, professionals are motivated to perform at ever higher levels. Lose that momentum . . . and it looks like just another passing fad (anybody remember TQM) . . . that inevitably undermines your next attempts.

□ Every new undertaking looks like a failure in the middle. Understanding this principle can make a huge difference. Predictable problems arise in the middle of every attempt to do something new, whether launching a new service offering, opening an international office, altering the partners’ compensation plan, instituting a small merger, or installing new technology. The more different it is from what's been done before, the more problems emerge. Give up at the first sign of trouble, and by definition the effort (and you?) is a loser.

A little known fact is that the Apollo moon missions were on course less than 1 percent of the time. The mission was comprised of almost constant midcourse corrections. That’s also true of most new endeavors.

In the "middle," you can overspend both time and money because forecasts are always overly optimistic. You should expect to have the unexpected pop up that no one knew was there. After all, no one has been down this path before. Momentum slows down due to fatigue - everyone likes the promise of beginnings, but middles are hard work. Or professional turnover in the middle of the endeavor means that valuable knowledge is lost, and the implementation team starts stumbling. And the middle is when the critics attack. Opponents start to notice and offer favorable comments about the project only when it looks like it might be a winner.

The lesson is clear: Success belongs to those who persevere. To convert imagination into useful results, leaders need patience, flexibility, and persistence. Leaders have the enduring task of inspiring and motivating people to put aside any small differences in the interest of larger causes.

That's not a fad; it's a permanent job description.

## **IF OUR FIRM (PRACTICE GROUP) WERE AN ORGANIZED RELIGION, WHAT WOULD OUR BELIEFS BE AND WHAT WOULD CONSTITUTE HAVING COMMITTED A SIN?**

Every championship team, in every endeavor, shares a surprisingly similar characteristic with every organized religion. Both groups have attained their exalted status largely by having some hard and fast, non-negotiable rules that everyone HAS AGREED to abide by. (Kudo's to David Maister for first bringing this one to our attention.)

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

□ First things first: At your next Executive Committee (or practice group) meeting start your agenda by reviewing your working practices. Ask of everyone:

- How well are we working together?
- What prevents us from being even more effective?
- What might we do to increase our effectiveness?

Notice that these three questions are all concerned with action.

□ Have your partners commit to writing and agree upon a set of sensible beliefs for how your championship team will work together.

Here are a few examples to stimulate your thinking:

- Make practice group meetings a priority . . . unless there is a client emergency, everyone is expected to attend . . . and attend on time. (What's your alternative?)
- Take responsibility for calling a time-out; every group member should do so when he or she notices dysfunctional behavior.
- Receive negative feedback non-defensively. The word "criticism" in Chinese, means "medicine for the ears."
- Conclude every meeting by determining the action items necessary to implement – everyone needs to participate and take ownership for action items. (If not now – when?)
- Honor commitments; if you say you will do something, do it. If you have committed to do something and a problem arises that will prevent you from following through, let us all know . . . in advance.
- Maintain confidentiality – the practice group's dysfunctional processes are the team's business – and no bad-mouthing members outside of the group.

□ And how, specifically, will we deal with sinners?

In the best groups, members have even agreed to what constitutes an infraction to the agreed rules and what sanctions will be imposed. Late for the meeting, you get to take the minutes. Negate on fulfilling your commitment to complete a project on time and you pay a monetary fine. There is always a need for some form of repentance that goes with offending rules. (Okay, this applies only if you truly want to have, and be a member of, a championship team).

“Involve everyone in brainstorming solutions, not blamestorming reasons.”

## WHAT DO OUR PROFESSIONALS AND SUPPORT STAFF GRUMBLE THE MOST ABOUT OVER LUNCH?

If you want to find out what bugs people, bug the lunchroom. Too many firms operate as though they had their own in-house Dr. Kevorkian attending to morale. It is hard to have a client-focused firm when those dealing with clients are hemmed in by rules, lack control, or feel abused by some senior partner above them. Hey . . . would you want your son or daughter to work in your firm?

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

□ The Support Staff's (subconscious) 'Golden Rule' for Client Service: "Do unto clients as partners have just done unto you."

We have never seen a firm with unhappy staff and delighted clients. How can it be, that in this age of information some are surprised to learn that there is a direct correlation between how we treat support staff and how they in turn deal with our valued clients? The evidence is painfully clear. Treat your people in a demeaning way and you will absolutely be guaranteed of that same treatment being extended to clients.

In one firm, the staff morale was so deplorable that the way in which staff chose to retaliate was to accidentally lose that important incoming fax expected from a key client.

Hence: Make evaluations by non-partners an additional component of all partners' performance appraisals.

□ Organize a Saturday morning "Retreat" for support staff only. Do a survey of staff opinions and solicit their ideas for improvement. (Why not?) They will be far more constructive than you might have feared. They want you to win.

Have them explore all of the impediments that provide blockage to them doing their very best, together with the creative and practical ideas that they may have for removing those same impediments. Help your support staff take action on those ideas.

□ Ask each partner in your group to identify the most significant obstacles to their enhancing their individual performance.

Ask: What currently prevents us from doing those things that we know we should do? (listening to our clients, collaborating with other partners, making decisions quickly, holding people accountable for results). Create your master list and work with your group to develop action plans to eliminate these obstacles. And by all means encourage your non-partners and support staff to do the same. They have all made a significant contribution by pinpointing ways that can add value and positively affect the group's effectiveness. If unattended, obstacles cause you to lose your edge (nice word) . . . can mediocrity be far behind?

“Only the mediocre  
are always  
at their best”

## WHAT BENEFIT SHOULD ACCEPTING ANY NEW CLIENT TRANSACTION CONVEY, OTHER THAN MORE REVENUE?

It is NOT how effective you are at attracting clients that defines the culture of your firm - rather it is how discriminating you are in accepting clients that best exemplify the kind of firm you want to be known as. Too many firms shoot at anything that moves and skin anything that stumbles into their traps. Hats off to those who discriminate over which clients they really want.

### Idea-generating thoughts:

□ In the best professional firms, every new client project is put before a special “screening” to decide:

- whether the firm has the ability to do it.  
(Can we provide value equal to or greater than the fee we would charge?)
- whether the job presents a sufficient challenge.  
(Will this be an intellectually exciting transaction ?)
- whether the client represents a suitable degree of prestige.  
(Would we be proud to say publicly that we represent this client?)
- whether the assignment offers any opportunity to build professional skills, knowledge and experience.  
(Will we learn something new by working on this engagement?)
- whether the assignment would allow us to achieve a level of realization consistent with the firm’s goals.  
(Is there potential for obtaining a “premium” or results based fee for our work?)
- whether the firm’s professionals would enjoy the relationship and hence could serve this client with enthusiasm.  
(Are these the kind of people we actually would enjoy working with?)
- whether the prospect is conveniently located such that our people would not spend too much time away from home with no offsetting advantages.  
(Is there a danger of burning-out some of our best people on this one?)
- whether the project provides anything beyond just additional income.  
(What other merits does this client project provide?)

Think about it . . . Having a screening process is one of those wonderful systems that forces partners to think . . . and carefully consider each client and project before they accept it.

□ What portion of your business are you abandoning on a regular basis? All business is not good business. Make hard decisions about those clients who are beneath your growing fee structure and no longer profitable; no longer provide a professional challenge or are too difficult to satisfy; are unable to provide the kind of references you want; or have become a problem by virtue of their payment habits or discount requirements. Concentrating upon providing outstanding service to clients who are inferior, difficult, and unprofitable is not exactly the recipe for generating excitement or loyalty among your existing professionals or the way to attract new talent to your firm. Fire your worst clients . . . or your best talent may eventually fire you!

“The only true professional career security is in being more valuable to clients tomorrow, than you were yesterday.”



## WHAT TOP THREE BUSINESS ISSUES ARE KEEPING OUR BEST CLIENTS AWAKE AT NIGHTS?

This question can go along way to help partners understand how incongruous they might be with the concerns of their clients and what they might need to do to become more relevant and more valuable to clients.

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

□ Have each partner (in your practice group) take a blank sheet of paper and list their largest and most important clients. Include as well: those (smaller) clients who represent fast-growing companies, or companies in emerging industries, that currently have or might soon present some form of significant business transactions.

Let's have each partner note next to each company on their lists, "the top three issues that are keeping executives in that company awake at nights" as best they can identify and articulate them. If your partners have trouble with this . . . and far too many will . . . is it any wonder that we hear clients say (real world comment): "I don't think they realize how their advice is disconnected from our business."

Now have each partner identify the various available sources of information that can be accessed to either obtain the required information or verify their identified assumptions.

- Read the client's annual reports and publications
- Peruse industry magazines and literature
- Review conference or trade meeting agendas
- Meet with and ask the client directly

Become your firm's High Priest (or Priestess) for curing client insomnia. Put in serious time on this. Care to guess how well the competitor, you respect the most, might score with this exercise?

□ As budgetary limitations can always be a sensitive issue with clients . . . explore with your partners what ideas everyone might offer for how you can improve your overall efficiency in handling your kinds of transactions and get client assignments accomplished at a lower cost.

Encourage everyone to ask "why" questions. Why are we doing things this way on a client's transaction? Why are we doing this at all? Would the client gladly pay us to be doing what we are doing? Would our clients prefer that we automate it, delegate it, outsource it, or eliminate it entirely?

Set an extraordinary goal to find the means to reduce your costs of conducting a specific project by 20 percent. See what your group can deliver. What we deliver today will not be enough for clients tomorrow, and what we charge today will be too much tomorrow. Guaranteed!

## WHAT STUPID THINGS DO WE DO THAT IRRITATES CLIENTS AND SHOULD BE KEEPING US AWAKE AT NIGHTS?

Most of us have finally caught on to the merits of measuring client satisfaction. What remains to be determined is whether we are asking the right questions. Be persistent in asking your clients how to serve them better. Try this question with a client: “Help us by identifying the really stupid things that you see us (as a firm or practice group) doing?” And quit fooling yourself by only looking to hear from the “good news bears.”

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

Get slightly devious. Get someone to pose as a potential client, as someone who is considering using your firm’s services, and call a client that has just had some important matter completed by your professionals to get their candid reaction as to whether they would “enthusiastically” recommend your firm’s services. Scarry???

Become a fervent devotee for surprising clients, not just satisfying them.

Can you find one example this week of someone in your firm actually doing something that caused a client to be PLEASANTLY surprised? If not, that sound you’re probably hearing is your competitor’s glee.

Have you measured your client’s perceptions regarding whether they believe that your service has improved or deteriorated over the past year? Why not?

Have you determined how loyal your existing clients are? Find out what it would take - what a competitor would have to do - to have your important client lured away from you. Most clients are brutally honest about telling you what it is that would pull them away. Try getting a group of your most critical clients together in a focus group and ask of them the really tough questions. Not tough for them to answer, but the tough questions for you to hear their responses to. Questions like: “Tell us how our work and our relationship could be structured in the future so that we might be of the greatest value and help to your company?”

Being satisfied is important, but what follows from that is the extent to which your existing client is planning to use your services over the coming year. Ask: “What would we have to do to be your preferred provider for all of your transactions?”

Do what they say. Don’t accept “You’re O.K.” as an answer. Keep asking. Don’t stop until at least 80 percent of your clients are willing to provide you with a written testimonial, and at least 50 percent of your new clients come from unsolicited referrals from your existing clients. If you are not getting consistently great word-of-mouth from your existing clients – you are definitely NOT ready to start marketing to new clients.

So you say you believe in the importance of referrals.

Professionals just naturally assume that everyone knows that they would welcome new business and that their existing clients will refer to them whenever possible. Unfortunately like many assumptions, this one is grossly unfounded.

A survey of professionals found that 90% did not maintain an active list of referral sources and 62% did not (in any way) thank those who referred clients to them. What have you done lately to thank those that are a major source for much of this new business that is directed to your firm?

Schedule an annual Referral Appreciation Dinner for all of the clients and others who have sent your firm a referral over the past year. Host it at a wonderful restaurant and take a moment during the event to pay tribute to and thank everyone for the confidence they have shown in the firm and for being a special member of your support group. Amazing coincidence . . . you will likely find that referrals increase for a period of time following your dinner.

If you don't have some kind of managed, formal program for thanking your referral sources, choose the reason why:

- I never thought of it.
- I'm a lazy bozo.
- We already get too many referrals.

Conduct a thorough third-party audit, each quarter, of any lost clients and of prospects who have never considered your services.

Do we even know when a client leaves . . . or do they just fade from sight as they quietly quit sending work? Develop measurements that track which clients are decreasing the amount of work they are sending the firm - and find out why.

Concurrently, do you know why certain prospective clients have never considered you? Do you care? Amazing insights can be obtained if you simply ask.

Make sure your firm's "notices", "alerts", and "newsletters" are perceived to be of value to clients or start to provide clients with real value by dispensing with them.

Stiff test: Would any client or prospect actually subscribe and pay some token amount to receive one of your newsletters? If you don't think they would, then what does that say about the value you attach to the newsletter's contents?

□ Study every point at which your firm makes contact with your existing or prospective clients.

You will find only a few contact points . . . your receptionist, your office, your business card, your public appearance. Just a few points of contact - the critical moments that decide whether or not you get the business.

What are you doing to make phenomenal impressions at every point? Study each point of contact. Then improve each one - dramatically.

There's been a lot of discussion about training support staff in important client relations skills. One large regional accounting firm is meeting this challenge head-on.

Arriving at this firm for a meeting, you are greeted by a very professionally dressed woman in her late 50s who helps you with your coat and makes small talk as she walks you to the conference room where the meeting is to be held. This woman's job is fairly comprehensive. It's her duty to greet clients and guests and to monitor incoming staff calls when appropriate (they need to answer the phone within a certain time frame and to use certain rules of etiquette. In addition, she has the authority to change voice mail greetings (gone are "Yo, I'm here but not answering my phone), and has general authority to make sure that a person calling or visiting this firm has a pleasant experience.

Her official title: "Director of First Impressions"!

Phone the average firm and ask the receptionist the name of the managing partner and it's fascinating to see what response you get! Tomorrow morning, have someone phone your office to find out.

Now have someone briefed to call your firm and try to get some specific substantive information from the receptionist or support staff about your various service offerings. Monitor how many times you get put on hold or have your call transferred. Make a note of the answers you receive. Would you do business with your firm?

Finally, have someone call your firm and use some ruse to try and gain sensitive information. For example, pose as a reporter doing a story on practice groups in different firms and ask questions about the firm's operations, billing rates, prominent clients, and profitability. Or, identify yourself as a head-hunter and see what kind of information you can get. How much information that you would consider "confidential" was actually given out?

“Today’s talented  
free-agents have  
few loyalties and  
even fewer regrets.”

## WHAT COULD WE DO (WITHOUT HIKING COMPENSATION) TO GET AND KEEP A LARGER SHARE OF THE KIND OF EXTRAORDINARY TALENT WE WANT IN OUR FIRM?

Tell me again: Why would someone really talented want to join your firm?

There is a war for talent going on. It's an intense battle now raging in every firm to hire and retain truly skilled professionals. If attracting and retaining high performers was ever easy, it isn't now. Poaching is rising to a fevered pitch. And partners are more mobile. Headhunters acknowledge that the number of firms a professional will work for in a career has jumped from 3, ten years ago to 5 today — in the new millennium that number may be much higher.

Professional talent matters. It probably matters more than tangible assets and perhaps even dictates the strength of intangible assets like brand and market position. The right group of talent is arguably the most valuable asset any firm can have.

Many firms have traditionally addressed this issue through monetary incentives. This question is designed to go beyond the money to explore what is attractive and unattractive about a firm's culture. The dynamic of the question requires you to think about why talented people join a firm, and why they might leave. There is usually dissonance between the two and that dissonance can provoke some invaluable insights.

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

□ When new, laterals or support staff make the transition from their old firms to yours, you have got them at one of the most malleable points in their career-life. They are open to change, willing to learn, and susceptible to bonding with your firm. They have just departed from their familiar comfort zone to a life of initial unpredictability, and the anxiety associated with something new. Instead of showing them their desk, wishing them well, and saying you will see them at performance review time; take advantage of an unprecedented opportunity to properly assimilate and orient them into your culture and help them become quickly productive.

- Send a handwritten personalized note about two weeks before the professional is scheduled to arrive.
- The morning of the first day, have a helium balloon printed with “Welcome” waiting in their office.
- During the first week with the firm, schedule a get-acquainted breakfast to present to others the special skills and knowledge that this person brings to the team.
- Assign another member of the practice group as “buddy” responsible for introductions to critical firm contacts and for briefing the new individual on the last six month's activities.
- Schedule a meeting to explain the practice group's noble purpose, specific goals, and group ground rules.
- Get them involved with some non-billable important group project by the end of the first week.

□ Recognize training as a recruitment and retention investment; and fund your training to the extent of at least 5 percent of revenues.

Calculate what your investment in training is as a percentage of your firm's total revenues. It is instructive to look at some firms reputed to have a strategy for making heavy investments in training. Among these are management consultants McKinsey and accountants Arthur Andersen. These two firms have a reputation both for having one of the highest per-capita training investments in their respective professions, and for being one of the most profitable firms in their profession. It has been widely reported that Arthur Andersen claims to spend the equivalent of over 7 percent of its revenues on training. It is not clear exactly what this includes, but if one assumes a 2000-hour year, this translates into 140 hours, or approximately 14 days of training for every professional in the firm, including partners.

The point here is not that all firms or practice groups should strive to attain these levels, but that there are at least a few that have clearly demonstrated that high training expenditures are entirely compatible with, if not a prerequisite for achieving extremely high profit per partner.

Make your commitment to invest in training. Start: ASAP. The best-managed, most progressive, most profitable firms in any given profession coincidentally are the ones investing the most in training. The question you have to ask yourself is, "What skills and knowledge could we give our people that would have a high payoff in helping them accomplish our strategic initiatives?"

View training as a process, not an event. Training isn't a class, but rather a long-term commitment to improving performance. Don't jam your training into one massive session. When you space learning over time it gets digested better and sticks with you. Eight two-hour sessions, a month apart have proven to be far superior to two days in a row.

Finally, ensure sure that those who choose to leave, voluntarily or not, can testify to having learned a lot and having made enduring relationships while they were with your firm. (As Tom Peters once said: Ye shall be known by your alumni!)

HELP WANTED SIGN - APPLE COMPUTER (early days)  
Wanted, an Impresario to preside over a workshop of wizards.

□ Loyalty is a funny thing. "It never really grows with the size of my check."

But it can sure be nurtured by the extent that you take an active interest in the members of my family. So, if you are truly interested in building my loyalty to your firm, what have you done lately to make my "significant other" feel like they're part of your family. Have you gotten them involved in any firm functions, helped them get integrated into any important community social networks, found a way to promote their individual business or career interests. Just remember, the degree to which my spouse loves the firm has a profound influence over how encouraging my spouse is toward enduring my long hours and ultimately, how I will feel about the firm.

## HOW DO WE DEVELOP THE KIND OF SKILLS THAT WILL MAKE US INDISPENSABLE TO CLIENTS?

What you now know and are able to now do, what your current practice's success is built upon, will unavoidably depreciate in value unless you actively work on learning new things and building new skills. Continual "know-how" development is a lifelong requirement, not an option. Unfortunately, the systematic development of skills, if left unattended will not happen by itself. Thus, this question is intended to provoke how we might best make ourselves "indispensable".

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

□ When we see learning as a phase of life rather than a way of life, it is easy to become set in that point of view.

Approaching mid-career, we can end up with our broad mind trading places with our narrow waist. We can become so narrow-minded that we have to stack our ideas vertically. Consider a few of the subtle signs that indicate you (or group members) may be facing stagnation and see if you can't remove both the terminology and the accompanying thinking from your approach:

- "We've always done it that way." - We don't challenge our assumptions anymore about how we might do things differently.
- "Been there, done that, what else is new." - When our sense of wonder and discovery is replaced by cynicism and apathy we lose our childlike curiosity.
- "That's not my experience." - It's often better to borrow and build upon the experiences of others than to rely only upon learning through our own devices.
- "That should be good enough." - Once you get comfortable with your experience and skills your comfort zone is becoming fossilized into a complacency zone.

The most successful professionals are constantly on the grow. Much like in financial planning where one of the key principles is to "pay yourself first", highly effective professionals devote at least 10% of their time to personal growth and developing new skills. Are you paying yourself first? Make your list of the three most important new skills you need to develop over the next twelve months and what specifically you will need to do to develop a higher level of competence.

□ In the information age, learning takes place in all directions, not just top-down.

Newcomers or lateral hires from outside your firm can sometimes add more value than firm veterans. The "kids" teach the seniors, and the foreigners teach the natives. This becomes especially true in those firms where the most senior group has spent the better part of their practicing careers in the same firm and can only appreciate the differences in what goes on at competing firms based on what they read in the press.

So, how do you tap into this knowledge base? Hopefully, your firm has some managed process whereby you debrief with newcomers sometime soon (two months following their arrival) after



they have been acclimatized, to get their views on what we could be doing differently and better, based on the newcomers observations and previous experiences.

□ Include “learning” as an integral part of your practice group meetings.

Some professionals behave as though they believed that the true purpose of every practice group meeting is to provide a forum for their long-winded presentation on what they have been up to lately. Keep in mind that information can be shared with group members in countless ways.

The very best use of the group's time is to review specific learnings and new developments acquired while serving clients, dealing with client problems, or gleaned by researching new and emerging issues that may impact the group's practice. There is a vast difference in the value of hearing a partners talk (in general terms) about a matter that they have been working on, versus hearing about what that partner specifically learned, that might be of use to others in the group, from the way in which a particular situation or transaction was handled.

Therefore, rather than: "tell us what you are working on?" the question should be phrased: "tell us please, what have you learned during these past few month that may be of value to the other members of our group?"

□ Initiate a “cross training” program for reciprocal benefit. Consider approaching an academic institution; government department; financial services, consulting, legal or accounting firm known to have a level of expertise relevant to serving the interests of the same client base and collaborate on conducting substantive training for each other’s professionals to enhance the skills base of both groups.

□ Consider utilizing the power of video to assist professionals in enhancing their knowledge. Have each practice group prepare to give an eight-minute presentation on camera. Have each explain: what it is that they do, what some of their most recent accomplishments have been, what the hot new areas of concern are for clients, and when it is that professionals in other practice groups should be thinking of them to proactively assist their clients.

□ Solid research reveals that the chances of anyone EVER applying training lessons that are not applied on the first day back, decreases dramatically over time.

What are you doing to help your people schedule and commit to do something different and productive on their first day back from attending a professional development program? No one should be funded for continuing education unless they make a solid commitment to share what they have learned with their group as soon as they return.

Physicians learn one, do one, and then teach one . . . perhaps we should all consider that a methodology worth emulating.

“Second place  
is just a politically  
correct term  
for being first . . .  
among the losers.”

## **WHY SHOULD A CLIENT CHOOSE OUR FIRM (PRACTICE GROUP), WHAT MAKES US DISTINCTIVE, AND WHAT SPECIFIC ADDED-VALUE DO WE BRING TO PARTICULAR BUSINESS MATTERS . . . THAT A CLIENT CAN NOT GET ANYWHERE ELSE?**

A curious irony is that most firms go to great lengths to look like every other firm. In fact a common reaction that you are likely to elicit from the management of any firm when first presenting a new market opportunity is: “Can you please give us a list of the other firms which are doing this”. Competitive advantage means getting out in front, by focusing on some area in which you can be unbeatable. By definition, if you are doing what everyone else is, you don’t have an advantage.

In answer to the question "Upon what basis is your firm truly differentiated from your competitors?" partners respond, but only after taking some time for reflection. The typical response usually will include some reference to the firm’s full breadth of services and high technical proficiency. This pause for reflection is interesting. It doesn’t suggest that the question came as a total surprise, as one that had never been asked before; or that this is an issue that this partner has not regularly considered. What it does suggest is that despite any previous contemplation, a wholly satisfactory answer has not been found and that a suspicion exists in the mind of this partner that he or she is offering, at best, only a superficial response.

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

Be differentiated not just different.

Look at it from the client’s POINT of view. At your next meeting, have each of your partners take a sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle. On the left side, have partners answer this question: If I were a prospective client - “Why should I choose you (your firm or practice group), what makes you distinctive, and what specific added-value do you bring to my particular business matters . . . that I can NOT get anywhere else?” (Note the last few words – the discomfort zone).

It would be highly unusual to get the same answer from two partners within the same practice group, and you certainly won’t get even a slightly similar response from two partners within the same firm. Sadly, most answers you hear are less than compelling . . . drab, dull, dreary cliches.

On the right side, for each response that partners do give, have them write what they would say if that prospective client responded to them with, “as evidenced by what?” (means: “prove it.”)

Develop your “song sheet.” Pronto.

Have partners identify in writing the most common and most challenging questions that they get asked by both prospect and clients. Then have them work to identify the very best responses that they might be able to offer together with some examples or references to support their assertions. Pass it around. Discuss it. Edit it. Refine it. Use it.

□ Aim to be the first to market, the first to organize a new practice group, the first to serve a new market sector. It's called the "First Mover Advantage" - It is sometimes better to be first than it is to be better. In general, the first gets half the market, while the second does well to get a 25% market share, and the latecomers divide the rest. It's that simple.

A curious phenomena: If you ask someone you consider fairly well-informed to name all of the firms who have a practice serving the "so-and-so" industry segment, at best, most will only be able to name three to five firms. And, the more narrowly focused the market segment, the fewer the names that individual will be able to recall.

MERCEDES AD:  
Turn ignition key. Shift into drive. Press foot firmly on the throat of mediocrity.

□ Have each practice group compile a record or summary of some of the most significant client matters each member of the group has been involved with over the past two years:

- Largest matters handled.  
(by virtue of dollar volume involved)
- New procedures, precedents, methodologies established.
- Significant transaction experience.  
(by virtue of complexity of client issues or sensitive human aspects)
- Total volume of dollars or total number of assignments handled.  
(by nature of client industry segment or practice area involved)
- Unusual work done or specific work done on behalf of unusual clients.
- Work done internationally on behalf of local clients - as well as - work done locally on behalf of foreign clients.
- Personal accomplishments or recognition.  
(articles published, high profile positions attained, news coverage, etc.)

Your compilation will provide the group with a number of interesting observations:

- Specific examples of client work undertaken that can be proudly related to prospects as evidence of the group's experience. Here's where we dazzle the prospect.
- Quantifiable statistics on the kind of volume that your practice group is becoming known for being able to handle. Hard numbers make hard impressions!  
("Over the past two years we have successfully undertaken twelve of the largest assignments in this area representing four of the major industry players.")

Finally, this exercise will help members of the practice group identify those areas where they feel they are doing "pioneering" work that may have application to other existing or prospective clients. Look for pleasant surprises and areas of emerging commercial opportunity within each group's cumulative experience base.

## HOW DO WE RATCHET-UP OUR PROFILE WHEN WE ARE EITHER THE NEWEST OR THE SMALLEST KID ON THE BLOCK?

When new market sectors and growth opportunities emerge, firms scramble to set-up, beef-up, or redefine their area of practice in an effort to position themselves as the “go-to” firm. Armed with more clout and a fatter wallet, large established firms are likely to find it easier to dominate the field. They are often already perceived as major players in related areas. How do you compete against established players with their larger practice groups?

You are likely to confront the spoken or unspoken resistance: “You’re not known for having any expertise in this area, why should we take a chance with you or your colleagues?” How you respond to doubts about your group’s future will determine whether your group has a future.

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

□ Convert your existing clients into glowing testimonials. Break the barrier of newness. Your existing clients already trust and respect your capabilities. Offer them concessions in exchange for endorsements. In return for those concessions have your client agree to take calls from prospects.

□ Provide the assurance of personal attention. Clients are not happy when their important matters are handed-off to other partners they don’t know or to more junior professionals on the team. Provide assurances to the prospective client that they will always be dealing with you and have your continual involvement as the relationship manager.

□ Bring an outside expert to your side of the table. Recruit a recognized expert when it’s needed. Many large consulting firms are masters at this. Look older and wiser by bringing in an acknowledged academic, retired industry executive, or some other luminary as a consultant to supplement the resources of your team.

□ Target only one discrete aspect of the transaction. Partner with another firm who brings a different but complimentary competence to the transaction and then offer the defined expertise of the two firms to get the job done.

□ Offer a limited-risk initial engagement. Propose a smaller test matter or only a part of the total transaction. Work on a value-based fixed fee. Some of your larger competitors may not want to stray from their normal billable hour position.

□ Offer the client a guarantee. Remove the risk. Assure the potential client that if they are not completely satisfied you will reduce your fees accordingly; then take steps to ensure that your client won’t need to exercise the guarantee.

Don’t be caught off guard. Defensively trying to explain how your team “can do it better, faster and cheaper” resonates with clients like a car alarm going off – no one pays any attention. Instead, try taking an offensive position to detail why your practice team may be the better choice.

“You can’t move *fast*,  
if you’re busy  
following the herd.”

## WHAT CRAZY IDEAS, IF ACTED UPON, COULD RESULT IN OUR BEING ABLE TO DOUBLE OUR PER PARTNER PROFITABILITY IN THREE YEARS?

Every firm today is obsessed with the issue of growth . . . of getting bigger. The issue is paradoxical. Ironically, firms continue to service clients and maintain practice areas that are neither profitable nor provide a jumping off point for other opportunities. This question is designed to have your partners focus directly on what should be, but often isn't, the result of getting bigger – improved profitability.

### Idea-generating thoughts:

□ Get rid of stuff and expand. Contract and grow. The all-things-to-all-people strategy is absolutely insane. Imagine that we've just completed a deep strategic analysis of your firm. Let us tell you what we know to be fact (go ahead and do your numbers . . . prove us wrong.)

- If you analyze your revenues over the last 3 years, you will discover that on average: 20% of your clients generate (read closely) 80% of your revenues.
- If you analyze your client-revenue mix based on reviewing those clients who generated 80% of the revenues in each of the last 3 years, you will discover that on average: 25% of the firm's services are used by less than 50% of your clients.
- If you analyze which clients are the most profitable, you will discover that on average: 50% of your profits are generated by 5% of your clients. (no kidding!)

□ If we delve even deeper into our analysis and assess our client – revenue mix by virtue of identifying those clients that provide us with the highest margins (engagement profitability) and the highest volume (repeat transactions), we will be in a position to determine the attractiveness of our client base according to where each client fits in a 4x4 matrix.

Low Volume – Low Margin	Here is where you will find about 64 percent of your clients
High Volume – Low Margin	Another 7 percent of your clients reside here . . . about half of which could become more profitable over time.
Low Volume – High Margin	This grouping of about 22 percent of your clients represent those who are very profitable and may have potential for further revenue from cross-selling efforts.
High Volume – High Margin	These clients, 7 percent of your base, account for 29 percent of revenues and clearly value an ongoing relationship.

In short, get rid of 80% of what you do and get damned good and expand the 20% that really is "special" and your firm will end up being far more profitable. Now there's a radical gesture! But then maybe we need to consider that in today's highly saturated, competitive market, if you're not working real hard at doing something to make yourself special . . . you may be getting obsolete.

“Nothing ever built,  
rose to touch the skies  
unless someone  
dreamed it should.”



## WHAT WOULD MOTIVATE YOU TO WORK 12 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK, FOR AN ENTIRE MONTH OR LONGER?

What motivational lever are you employing to engage the hearts and minds of your professionals? What is your practice group's raison d'être? What significant contribution does your group make to the firm, the industry you serve, or the profession you belong to? This question is not only intended to have each of us think about what we do, but why we do it and what would challenge us to go beyond the ordinary. What, if anything, is our compelling challenge to want to achieve?

### **Idea-generating thoughts:**

□ The best firms manage conflict by having their professionals abandoning individual egos to the pursuit of some “compelling challenge.” Having some understood and shared challenge is the single most important building block in enabling a practice group of unlikely collaborators to come together. That challenge can be a powerful antidote for professionals to overcome their natural tendency to spend time pursuing one's own agenda or defending one's turf. Professionals are inspired to collaborate when they sense a challenge that is deeply meaningful for them and they recognize that they can't accomplish it alone.

The legitimate first step - ask the partners in your firm (or your group): “What would motivate you to work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for an entire month or longer?” Think about the last time you were really excited about achieving a significant goal. The answers you are most likely to hear include some variation on:

- to accomplish some specific, high profile project.  
(high stakes – time sensitive)
- to fulfill a dream, have an adventure, champion a cause, or engage in a crusade.  
(aiming to accomplish something that redefines the very essence of their practice)
- to attain a position of superiority over an enemy, competitor, and rival.  
(can be real, created, or imagined)
- because they see themselves as rebellious underdogs with something to prove.  
(mavericks with fresh ideas)

It all means striving for something . . . struggling for something . . . noble, uplifting, inspiring.

□ Put slightly differently, “As a group . . . what breakthrough goal would we like to achieve?” “What complex problem would we like to solve?” “What would we like to create that never existed before?” or “What competitor would we like to absolutely vanquish?”

Articulate your group's compelling challenge – realistic or crazy – and pursue it. Get outrageous. Be the group everyone talks about. Focus on the excitement of the endeavor. Remind the team of what's at stake. Once we are captured by the challenge, our molecules get rearranged and one of the greatest forces in our human arsenal gets activated - determination. Never doubt the capacity of the professionals you lead to accomplish whatever you dream for them. The Lesson - - Most ambitious professionals do NOT want to join a firm or some practice group – they want to join a movement! Something that has a larger meaning, makes us feel that we have made a difference, and gives us the opportunity to leave our mark.