



HOW DO YOU TEND TO YOUR GARDEN?

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I had the opportunity to stay with dear friends at the seashore on the July 4th weekend. Most people would jump at the opportunity. Although I was tempted to opt for the delightful company, I instead chose to do what I love most: tend to my garden. It's rare that I get the opportunity to devote a significant amount of time to my garden anymore.

As I quietly toiled in the soil, I couldn't help but think about the fact that, in so many ways, I find that my gardening is really a metaphor for the way I live my life, and the lessons I apply to helping people manage their firms. That may sound odd. But let me give you a simple example.

For many of you who have invested time in your garden, you have probably found weeding to be one of the more unsatisfactory tasks. Every garden needs tending. Some activities tend to be more satisfying. Planting and mulching are both satisfying tasks, as they have an immediate visual impact, which enhances our enjoyment and rewards our labor. But weeding is not such a task. It is often laborious. And while our efforts improve the appearance of the garden by making it less untidy, we know that the improvement is temporary. We will inevitably need to weed again.

One of the lessons I have learned over the years is that there is a big difference between removing a weed *from* the ground, and breaking it off *at* the ground. While both provide the same improvement in appearance, the former is more productive and has a longer lasting effect, while the latter is a short-lived improvement.

As a seasoned gardener, I can clearly feel when I have successfully removed the weed, including its roots. I can literally feel it freeing itself from the ground. And of course I can see the attached roots as I toss it into the pail. When the plant breaks off at the ground I feel the difference. I immediately use my hands to move

aside sufficient soil and mulch so as to grasp the remaining stubborn root ball or tuber and free it from the earth. This way I know that my efforts are not in vain. That same weed will not be returning in a matter of days or weeks, to join the inevitable new weeds which will take hold.

Weeds will always sprout. But by doing a thorough job of removing them I can keep up, and keep the garden tidy. Otherwise, I would be spending more and more time, but the weeds would overtake the garden despite the increased efforts.

It's not hard to see how this clearly applies to the manner in which we deal with issues which arise at our firms. As an example, I have worked with firms which have difficulty holding onto good talent. I ask for a list of all who have left in the previous few years. We review the list together, with me asking probing questions about why each has left.

I usually get very superficial answers to most questions about departures. Sometimes I hear "we were glad that person left," as though that explains anything. Other times I hear just the reasons someone gave when providing notice. What I find, metaphorically speaking, is that the firm has broken off the weed at ground level, and never dug further. It was easier to hear a bearable excuse like "They've made me an offer I couldn't turn down," than purposely delve deeper to determine why the person was open to the offer in the first place.

Sit back and think for a minute or two. Are there thorny issues at your firm which keep coming up over and over? Issues you think you've finally resolved once and for all; only to find their way back onto your plate? That's because you haven't dug deeply enough to uncover and remove the roots. There will always be issues to manage. But if the same issues keep returning, you eventually are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of new and old recurring issues.

Many years ago I wrote an article "Managing Partner Burnout" [for a copy email lawpractice@pabar.org]. I readily admit that my perspective on the role of the managing partner has evolved since that article was written. Back then I considered that the role of the managing partner necessarily included day-to-day operational oversight.

Back then I felt that midsize or larger firms which hired professional managers were smart and ultimately more successful. While that was certainly true for those who actually allowed those managers to do what they were hired to

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do, I increasingly encounter firms where the managing partner micromanages unnecessarily.

Nowadays, I strongly encourage firms to truly delegate responsibility for day-to-day management to a professional manager, at all but the very smallest firms. I believe that the managing partner must focus much farther on the horizon; thinking and acting strategically; leading the firm in such a way as to identify and maximize opportunities, build on strengths, shore up weaknesses, and anticipate and defend from vulnerabilities. In addition, a successful firm must constantly work to build alignment of vision and goals among partners. It must work to develop the glue which binds people to the firm. Less email and more face time is a start, but that's just ground level work. Getting below the surface, one must look at the roots of people's wants and needs; locate the points of commonality; identify what makes the firm special.

Similarly, one must get below the surface to get to the root causes of the negative issues which keep returning, and do a more thorough job of removal at a deeper level. That will prevent the same issues from chronically returning.

Where my garden—and life—is concerned, there are some things I readily admit I cannot adequately do. I may have insufficient knowledge or ability. I do what I can, but I also know when to pick up the phone for assistance. When I do that, I know the type of assistance I need, as I have already identified and examined the challenge thoroughly. How do you tend to your firm's garden? Do you dig deeply enough to eliminate the roots of issues, and call in assistance when the task is beyond you? Remember, I'm here to help.

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