



## I HAD A DREAM

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I wish I could say I had a dream in the noble, Martin Luther King sense. No. It was more in the vein of a surreal Rod Serling Twilight Zone episode. And upon awakening, I did what I have been doing since I was a young girl. I grabbed the pen and pad I keep on the nightstand by the bed, and quickly jotted down some notes about my dream. It enables me to remember particularly disturbing or vivid dreams later, after they stop haunting me and fade away like mist in the morning sun. Then I can better analyze them and deal with what they reveal. My sister, a world-renowned psychologist, once imparted to me some psycho-babble words of wisdom which essentially said that my dreams are a particularly strong coping mechanism I utilize to make sense of my world, and deal with issues of daily living. Hey, it works for me. That's about all I can say about this habit of mine, odd though it may seem.

My dream was about managing law firms. A series of law firms. Each law firm kind of morphing into the next. Each law firm consisting of a conglomeration of partners, associates and staff I have served and managed in some capacity over the years, either as Administrator of a particular firm long ago, or as a private consultant in recent years. Some of the firms were relatively "real" and others were just composites created by an over-active imagination.

Each firm in my dream exploded, imploded, failed spectacularly, or withered to nothing with barely a whimper. In my dream there was a glaring moment, or a series of events played out almost in slow motion, or the actions of a particular personality at each firm, which clearly indicated to me that I was witnessing the cause of the impending demise of the firm. In my minds eye it was like watching players on the stage who were suddenly illuminated and magnified by a very strong spotlight.

In each instance I tried to dissuade, persuade, or alleviate the situation in order to alter the inevitable path of the firm. I was frustrated in knowing that I could clearly see what was happening, but no one else could. Why, my mind kept asking, couldn't anyone else see what I was seeing? And none of my efforts to change the actions of key players at the numerous firms in my dream had any impact whatsoever. It left me with a feeling of existential dread, like there was no

free will — people were seemingly locked into some path they were destined to take, no matter the consequences.

Although I have never managed a firm which exploded, imploded, failed spectacularly, or withered to nothing *during* my tenure, I *have* repeatedly been witness to that glaring moment in time, cumulative actions of a particular personality, or series of events when the wheels were set in motion. And in the instances where I was unable to alter the self-destructive course, I left before it happened — sometimes just six months ahead of time — but at least I didn't have to live through the really ugly parts. As a private consultant, when I find that a client is set on a path which will end badly, and they don't really want to be helped despite my best efforts — aren't willing to change the path they're on — I politely disengage from the situation.

Ok, so what's my point? The point of the dream, I later realized, was that I want to—*need* to— raise your consciousness, maybe just a little, and maybe just enough, to enable you to see the defining spotlight as clearly as I have, so that perhaps you can avert disaster at your firm, or at least get out before it happens. Those glaring moments boil down to and are caused by emotional attitudes and personality characteristics. Some are held by individuals, others are part of a firm's unique personality. Let me try to sum them up.

**Hubris.** For individuals it's evidenced by a smugly superior attitude, disdain for other partners, firm managers, other law firms, and actions which are so “over the top” they have little basis in reality. For firms it's evidenced by an unrealistic identification of rivals which are actually out of the league of the firm, expecting compensation or associate talent which is totally out of step with the firm's image, means or market position, and results in inappropriate and sometimes harmful strategies being employed.

At one firm hubris resulted in installation of a million dollar state-of-the-art network, when a forklift overhaul of the computer infrastructure could have been satisfactorily achieved for under \$400,000. But the partner in charge of technology had to have something bigger and better than any other firm around, including those five to ten times larger. Unfortunately, the firm could not afford the investment or resulting debt service. Nor were the partners in agreement about the personal guarantees required for the loan. It was a huge point of contention. That firm no longer exists.

**My way or the highway.** Ok admit it. You've worked with this person. If not at your present firm, than at a former one. This is the alpha dog at the firm.



He or she directly or indirectly sets the rules, creates the firm culture, determines the compensation, judges everyone and everything. Now I'm not saying that this is a totally bad thing for the firm. In fact, when a "bully" is at the pulpit, a firm is better able to make progress rapidly, successfully adapt to changing market conditions, and is almost always well aligned internally. But the implementation and direction of change is only decided from one perspective. And the only cure for misalignment is to leave. [See "Leaders, Managers and Bullies", *PA Bar News*, 3/3/03.]

Such is the case at friendly mid-size firm. A young promising partner there, touted as the "next generation managing partner" is quietly preparing to leave. Why? A deep belief that the firm will always be 100% controlled and directed by one dominant personality, no matter who else is a "named" partner, or who is designated "managing" partner. When the departure happens, it will have a crushing effect on the atmosphere of the firm, and may lead to other defections as well.

**You can't make me — active resistance.** Ok, you know this person, too. This is the person who says you can make all the rules you want, but they don't apply to him/her. Open defiance is his or her style. It seems this person is always locked in a power struggle with others. The more others agree, the more he or she will need to disagree. And the more strongly he or she will react.

What makes him even more difficult to tolerate is that he may hold you to rules that he will not follow. Example? You must fill in your timesheets contemporaneously every day and hand them in that night or she will express her displeasure clearly, and sometimes with economic consequences. But she'll disregard the same rule, getting in her timesheets when she damn well feels like it, even it means holding up the month-end closing, and the financial detriment of the firm.

This person is also sometimes referred to as a contrarian. If you say day, he will say night. He needs to disagree. She refuses to be led. No matter how great an idea someone comes up with, if it requires everyone pulling in the same direction, she will find fault with it. As a consequence, it becomes impossible to create and execute strategic plans. The firm falters in the absence of teamwork and agreement.

**You can't make me — passive aggressive.** You may work with this person but not realize it. In some cases, they're the most destructive, because they can effectively operate and undermine while remaining under your radar screen.



He or she will agree to your face wholeheartedly or “in principle,” but behind your back will either generate resistance or just refuse to cooperate. In some firms this is typified by the person who appears “willing” but always has a few more concerns and questions before agreeing to be part of or approve any plan or strategy. She will also agree but fail to implement, but always with some lame but plausible excuse. You will often misinterpret the failures as ineptitude or laziness, rather than recognize them for what they are — indications of resistance.

Firms suffering from the actions of a passive aggressive demonstrate an inability to change and adapt to market conditions, or to successfully implement strategies and plans.

**I just need be different.** Oh boy, you’re not going to like it one bit when I say this. This is probably you. The fact is, 89% of lawyers have a need for autonomy, compared with only 50% of the general public. You just need to be different. You need to be independent. You don’t feel that you should have to follow a bunch of rules. You are, after all, a professional. And you don’t “agree” very often to be led. It’s not that you necessarily disagree with a particular rule or leader, you just don’t like being part of the crowd.

What I have consistently found over the years is that lawyers will do amazing things, often destructive things, in order and be differentiated and/or independent from their colleagues.

In relatively harmless ways this is evidenced by the attorney who refuses to use the same font and letter style as others; by the attorney who cannot use any form, even the firm’s engagement agreement, as is without customizing it. In a more harmful sense we see whole firms of individual practitioners who are totally misaligned and merely share overhead. These individuals are not at all interested in the success of the firm as a whole. And sometimes, in order to maximize what appears in “their” column, will disregard or actually harm the firm or its clients.

What personality types does your firm have, and what impact are they having on the operation of the firm? Is your firm failing to make progress? Failing to respond to changing market conditions? Unable to agree and work together for the common good of the firm? Fraught with dissention and tension? Suffering defections? If you’re answering yes to some of these questions, then perhaps your firm needs some assistance.

If you are not aware of the work of Dr. Larry Richard of Hildebrandt International, your firm should be. Dr. Richard is the head of the Leadership &



Organization Development Practice Group at Hildebrandt, which helps law firms and legal departments on people issues. Since the early 1980's, he has pioneered the application of psychology and other behavioral sciences to the improvement of leadership and management practices in the legal profession. Prior to becoming a consultant, he was a trial lawyer for ten years in Pennsylvania and New York. With a J.D. from the University of Pennsylvania Law School and a Ph.D. in Psychology from Temple University, he has spent over 20 years working with hundreds of law firms and corporate law departments to improve human performance in ways that improve the bottom line, increase satisfaction, and promote teamwork. He can be reached at 800.223.0937 x410 or [LRRichard@hildebrandt.com](mailto:LRRichard@hildebrandt.com). Just make a note for future reference. He's not the only person doing what he does, but he's probably the best. And if you know me, you know I don't say that often about anyone.

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