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Crossing Bridges to Build Bridges

Career Development



I arrived at the Slidell branch before the rain began in earnest. The office manager expressed surprise that I'd come across Lake Ponchartrain in this weather, and suggested that I might not want to stay the whole day, seeing as the floodwater pumps might not bring their A-games that day. I took that advice, and perhaps I should've taken it sooner; the visibility heading back into New Orleans, or rather the lack of it, made for a white-knuckle drive back over the causeway.

There was still enough time to take the team to lunch, though. We gathered around a large round table at the local branch of a premium burger chain known for its unlimited servings of french fries, and spent only a moment or two talking about legal and compliance issues. Most of the discussion centered on Mardi Gras, Lundi Gras, what krewes or clubs people participated in, and which parades were essential this year. Prior to this, I'd more or less thought of Mardi Gras as a thing that happened on Fat Tuesday in the French Quarter, but came away understanding that it's a whole festival season, all over the state (and beyond). I wish more places had something that helped foster a sense of community the way Mardi Gras does there.

An observation: if you Google "french fries" in order to determine whether "french" should be capitalized in that context, you will see many pictures of french fries. If you are anything like me, you will then really, really want french fries.

I'd come to New Orleans for the ACC board meeting. I added a day to my trip in order to visit our company's branch in (relatively) nearby Slidell. Historically, my visits to branches have been centered on internal investigations, audits, and the like. Understandably, a visit from the legal department doesn't exactly spark joy for most of our employees. Even so, I take every opportunity during those visits to meet as many employees as I can, and to set aside "office hours" for anyone to share ideas, questions, or concerns.

This year, my goal is to carve out time to visit branches just for the sake of visiting them — and meeting my colleagues who work there. I'm fortunate to work for a company with an IT system that permits me to work securely from nearly anywhere. Adding a visit like this when I'm already traveling for another reason is an easy and cost-effective way to build connections across the enterprise while not losing much ground on my day-to-day responsibilities.

I learned years ago that it's one thing to have an open-door policy for employees, and another to actually get them to come through. For many people, the mere prospect of contacting an attorney for any reason is daunting. On top of that, our profession isn't exactly the most loved. Anything we can reasonably do to reduce the resulting psychological distance can really improve effectiveness in so many of the things we try to accomplish.

In my prior position, I noticed that, after returning home from visiting an office in another state, I'd get calls from folks there that I'd met for the first time during the visit. These employees were not new to the company, and they would invariably raise questions about the sorts of things we want our employees to ask in-house counsel. I observed this enough times that I can comfortably say that there is a correlation between face-time and subsequent calls, texts, and emails. I further observed that this effect was not a lasting one; less than a year after a visit, contact from that office would revert to what it'd been before.

Building relationships and trust with others in the company — outside the context of providing legal services — can make a big difference in one's effectiveness when attention turns to more challenging issues. For in-house attorneys in small departments (or departments of one), with multiple responsibilities across the enterprise, this is particularly critical. We require candid communication from the people with whom we work. Unfamiliarity, coupled with widespread negative impressions of attorneys, is a big barrier to that. Look for opportunities to get to know as many people in your company as you can at a personal level, and help them get to know you. The connections you make over a favorite team, a hobby, movies, travel, or other life experiences might seem like mere pleasantries amidst episodes of getting the "real work" done, but they can also ensure that these people don't hesitate to turn to you in those times when they, and the company, can't afford to do without your help.

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