



## 3 Skills No Partner Can Do Without

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Law360, Los Angeles (May 18, 2016, 2:57 PM ET) -- BigLaw partners take pride in their sharp legal skills, but simply analyzing clients' problems and drafting killer motions aren't enough to truly thrive in a partnership role. Partners also need to develop the skills to support an effective team and generate holistic legal strategies for clients.

Having technical expertise in legal matters is a "threshold requirement" for partners, according to [Morrison & Foerster LLP](#) partner James Schurz, who said the best partners have additional skills that keep clients coming back. Here, attorneys with decades of experience share the three skills partners need to stand out within their firms.

### Leading a Team

Attorneys emphasized one key skill every partner needs: the ability to truly build a team with their colleagues.

James Hurst, a partner and member of the worldwide management committee at [Kirkland & Ellis LLP](#), said he views the ability to take other attorneys and put them in a position to shine as essential for a partner.

"You just have to recognize the reality that you can't do it alone, and if you're going to win in court and impress a client you have to have great people helping you," he said. "The only way to get great people helping you on a consistent and long-term basis is to give them opportunities."

Hurst said that partners who are territorial with their clients are likely hobbling their practice over the long term compared to the partners who have the confidence to share the load with the other "exceedingly talented lawyers" at their firms.

Gibson Dunn partner Marcellus McRae compared successful partner's skills to those of an NBA point guard like the Oklahoma City Thunder's Russell Westbrook, who knows how to take over a game and also how to get his teammates the ball.

"It's this notion of the ability to lead and stand on your own, but at the same time welcoming and encouraging and actively seeking out the participation of other people in the group," he said.

Having strong team-building skills is not only essential for best serving clients, Schurz said, but is an ability firms hold "at a premium," and is a key factor for a partner's success, especially at a large firm like Morrison & Foerster.

Anton "Tony" Natsis, chair of Allen Matkins Leck Gamble Mallory & Natsis LLP's real estate practice, emphasized that this team-building ability is at the very heart of what it means to practice in a partnership. Natsis said that partners need to not only be thinking about the colleagues that can help with their current matters, but the attorneys that can carry a firm in the future.

"If it wasn't good idea to be partners, we would have figured out a different way to practice law ... so let's take it to the highest level," he said. "We are building the partnership for many generations, not just our generation."

### **Looking at the Big Picture**

The most successful partners have the ability to look beyond the boundaries of a particular legal issue and see the overall impact their advice will have, attorneys said.

Hurst said that the most successful partners are those who develop a reputation for good judgment.

"Half the battle is merely recognizing that clients value someone who is striving to look at the big picture, including the business side of things," he said.

McRae said that in addition to being lawyers, partners need to see themselves as general problem-solvers for their clients, and said that starts with having a holistic view of those clients' businesses.

"With a breach of contract, you don't just have a legal problem ... there might be budgetary issues, collateral consequences," he said. "It's having a global perspective of all the different issues, spotting the issue that a client may face and figuring out how to be a problem-solver."

The upside of having a global view is the ability to offer concrete, understandable advice, according to Schurz. He said that the best partners are able to give practical counsel because they understand clients' interests are broader "than positions one may take in the context of a particular litigation or a particular negotiation."

"That's why attorneys who have a deep appreciation for the business objectives and understanding of the business objectives of their clients are so prized," he added. "That's how you get repeat business, and that's how you end up having lifelong relationships with people."

Hurst recalled a time early in his career when a client CEO came to him with a legal question and he was able to give him a business solution to the problem.

"I believe he's always remembered that," he said.

## **Taking Ownership**

Attorneys said that work ethic and personal responsibility are a skill set as well, pointing out that successful partners can't forget to back up their other skills with the ability to guarantee their clients' needs are met.

Natsis said that a skilled partner is "like a race car with a seventh gear." Natsis said the best partners aren't in seventh gear all the time, but when they need to, they can put the pedal to the metal to make sure a job gets done right.

"I'm not talking about working seven days a week or 20 hours a day," he said. "But I'm talking about when it's necessary, you can do it, and because you have that extra gear, it's not stressful for you, it's productive."

McRae said that even though partners work on a team, they need to have the capacity to

step forward and ensure that tough tasks get done and get done right.

"You are the last stop, you are the last line of defense, you aren't assuming or anticipating that someone else is going to look over your shoulder or make a correction," he said.

"Having the mentality of 'put it on my back' ... I think that quality is something that essential."

Hurst said that partners need to be skilled at taking ownership of their work because clients "don't have a lot of patience for excuses."

"My clients don't ever want to hear from me: 'I'm sorry we got you the draft so late, the associate got it to me late,'" he said. "They want things to get done and get done well, and they expect me to take responsibility for making sure it happens."

Natsis noted that a partner who is willing to go the extra mile on their own will also be able to get the most out of their colleagues.

"If you're selfless and team-oriented and an incredibly hard worker and you want other people to do that too, they can't deny that, because you're there with them," he said.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Kelly Duncan.