

Practical Success

Cordell M. Parvin

Rainmaking: Talent Is Overrated

I meet many young lawyers who instinctively know they should get better at client development, but either never take the first step, or take the first step and give up. These lawyers have bought into the idea that only a few lawyers have what it takes to become rainmakers.

A couple of years ago I met with the managing partner of a 500-lawyer firm for which I was about to begin coaching 15 junior partners. He was my age, and in addition to being the managing partner, he was a leading rainmaker.

During our conversation, he expressed skepticism about the value of coaching. He said: “Rainmaking, you either have it or you don’t. Some lawyers are meant to be finders, others minders, and others grinders.”

While I agreed that for some people client development comes more naturally than for others, I respectfully disagreed with his premise that lawyers either have it or they don’t. Several months into our coaching program, he acknowledged that based on what lawyers in the firm were doing differently, lawyers can learn to develop business.

Lately, I have been writing about how rainmakers are developed rather than being born with the gift to attract clients. I have shared with you some of Geoff Colvin’s thoughts from his book and article, *Talent is Overrated*.



What Beats Talent?

When I mentioned the book to Kevin O’Neill, a D.C. lawyer I coach with Patton Boggs, he responded that talent will never beat:

- Being the first one to know something of value for a client;
- Showing up early and staying late;
- Exerting enough effort to allow luck to play to your benefit; and
- Convincing the clients that they matter to you and you are focused on serving them.

Kevin hadn’t read the book, but he certainly understood its principles. Simply engaging in a flurry of activities like meeting contacts for lunch, writing articles, and speaking is not enough—that’s the rainmaking equivalent of the golfer who stands on the practice range hitting bucket after bucket of balls, but who never actually gets out onto the golf course.

Deliberate Practice

Colvin, and researchers before him, talk about “deliberate practice.” He describes the typical golfer on the driving range hitting large buckets of balls without any improvement. On those rare occasions when I practice golf on the range, I am one of those golfers who does not get better.

Cordell M. Parvin built a national construction practice during his 35 years practicing law. At *Jenkins & Gilchrist*, Mr. Parvin was the Construction Law Practice Group Leader and was also responsible for the firm’s attorney development practice. While there he taught client development and created a coaching program for junior partners. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development and planning and client development. He is the co-author of *Say Ciao to Chow Mein: Conquering Career Burnout* and other books for lawyers. To learn more visit his Web site, www.cordellparvin.com or contact him at cparvin@cordellparvin.com.

My wife, Nancy, is a different story. She took up golf when she was 40 and now plays in tournaments all over the country. She is driven to get better, and unlike me, she focuses on specific shots in specific situations and has a teacher giving her feedback. I have seen her work on sand shots, flop shots over traps, and knock down shots into the wind. When we play “date golf” she works on those shots on the course. Nancy understands deliberate practice.

Colvin refers to a landmark research paper done by K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch Römer: *The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance*, available at <http://projects.ict.usc.edu/itw/gel/EricssonDeliberatePracticePR93.pdf>. With the research, Colvin suggests that “deliberate practice” has these characteristics:

- It is designed specifically to improve performance, often with a teacher’s help;
- It can be repeated often;
- Feedback on results is continuously available;
- It is highly demanding mentally, meaning it requires us to focus on the task at hand; and
- It isn’t much fun, because we are doing things we do not do well rather than doing things we already do well.

I think I owe a great deal to deliberate practice. I did it for legal skill development as well as client development. Here are my ideas for how lawyers can deliberately practice client development skills:

- Figure out what is going on and the implications for your clients. I read *Engineering News Record (ENR)* weekly looking for news that would create legal issues for contractors. If I were still practicing law, I would have iGoogle pages and Google alerts and read the ENR alerts to find issues;
- Write articles. I wrote a monthly column in *Road & Bridges*, a top industry publication for 25 years. Over time, I got better at selecting the topic, creating the title, getting readers engaged

in the first paragraph, and offering a conclusion readers found helpful;

- Do some public speaking. I was so nervous the night before my first presentation to a construction industry group that I could not sleep a wink. I overcame being nervous by speaking in public as often as possible, including teaching senior high Sunday school at my church. I also shot videos of myself speaking over and over again until I got more comfortable;
- Network. I always hated networking and striking up conversations with people I did not know. I decided I needed to network frequently to become better at it. I went to functions just to practice my networking skills;
- Think up elevator speeches and elevator questions. I practiced these on airplanes and other places where I met strangers;
- Work on asking questions and listening. In law school we are not taught how to ask questions, and over time I believe we have lost our listening skills. Every meeting I had with a client I worked on asking better questions and being focused on the answers. I also read books on asking questions and improving listening skills.

In *Talent is Overrated*, Colvin talks about the important role teachers, coaches, and mentors play in developing skills. First, your teacher, coach or mentor will help design the activities best suited for you to deliberately practice client development skills. Second, your teacher, coach, or mentor can give you unbiased feedback on how you are doing.

Do you have some thoughts on the kinds of things that lend themselves to the “deliberate practice” approach to client development? Please share your ideas and suggestions with the author at coaching@cordellparvin.com.