

PRACTICE FOCUS / THE PROFESSION

Run Out Every Ground Ball: A Good Lesson for Lawyers

Commentary by
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In Little League, our first base coach never got tired of telling the players to “run out every ground ball.” Who knows—the first baseman may make an error, the fielder may bobble the ball or you may be faster than you thought and reach first base safely.

The instruction is a good lesson for lawyers. In the course of our careers, opportunities exist to become better lawyers and enhance our personal satisfaction within our profession. The best approach is to take advantage of those opportunities by volunteering to serve on local bar association committees, the Florida Bar, and national organizations such as the American Bar Association.

All provide tremendous opportunities to learn from

others. Along the way, you will learn the importance of preparing a meeting agenda, how to run an efficient meeting and develop an action plan to lead you to the finish line. Most importantly, you ultimately forge relationships with other colleagues that may start out as a business proposition that can lead to personal friendships. It is this aspect that becomes most satisfying. The benefits quickly materialize.

Suddenly, your volunteer work provides you with a network of colleagues to consult with on case challenges, strategy and receive honest advice on your career without fear that someone in your firm may view your questions as “stupid” or that you “may be on the verge of leaving.” That is a primary driver, but the continuing opportunities to develop substantive

and practical knowledge can be more invaluable.

Serving on a Florida Bar Grievance Committee can open your eyes to how a simple failure to communicate with clients and procrastination in dealing with issues can lead to a career disaster. You quickly learn, by real-world examples, how to avoid mistakes and career bumps in the road that may blemish a reputation you have worked so hard to achieve.

You also learn how our profession is misunderstood by the public. Through this volunteer service, you can best understand what lawyers need to do to bring our reputation back to being a “trusted adviser” as opposed to being viewed as an argumentative group focused only upon money and opportunity. We should take the attitude that “we learn from others” and

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Lesser

understand how we can benefit from that approach.

One valuable opportunity in Florida is to become board certified in a specialty area of law. Florida is unique in that it has 27 different specialty areas of legal certification from adoption law, appellate, civil trial, construction, condominium, workers' compensation and more.

After five years of practice and devoting a percentage of your time each year to your specialty, along with satisfying certain continuing legal education requirements and a peer review process, you become eligible to take the board certification examination. The exam is generally six hours, consisting of a variety of multiple choice, short answer and essay questions. This is not an easy exam nor should it be if you are to be held out to the public as an expert in your field. But what it will do is make you a better lawyer, providing you with more confidence in advising and representing clients. In fact, studying for the exam will do that as each specialty area has its own

specifications of topics to learn. As a board certified lawyer, you should have "walking around" knowledge of these topics if you hope to pass.

Florida has the largest board certification program in the country. Texas, California and others have certification programs but none as progressive as Florida. Gaining board certification provides an opportunity to learn more, develop your credentials, and build confidence as a lawyer as well as to elevate your status within your firm.

Aside from becoming board certified, publications exist in Florida and throughout the country that seek articles from lawyers on a wide range of topics. Write an article, become a published author and develop expertise. The billable work you did researching a legal issue can be converted to an article that can be published locally or on a national platform.

Publishing can set you apart from other lawyers competing for career opportunities or

obtaining work in a specialty area. A published paper can lead to an invitation to speak and exposure to new people in the industry where you practice or to other colleagues that may refer work to you.

You should never stop learning or building your credentials because both will lead you to greater satisfaction in your career. The great Arnold Palmer was right when he said, "The road to success is always under construction."

You can always do better and the start of it all is to raise your hand, volunteer to serve your profession and become board certified. You never know where it will lead unless you take those opportunities and "run out every ground ball."

Steven B. Lesser is chair of the construction law group at Becker. He is board certified in construction law and incoming chair of The Florida Bar Board of Legal Specialization and Education that oversees all 27 areas of board certification. He also serves on the American Bar Association Standing Committee on Specialization.