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The Senator and the Grasshopper

GRASSHOPPER, a good but inexperienced lawyer, asks her rainmaker mentor for advice on business development

GRASSHOPPER WAS A SIXTH-YEAR merger and acquisitions associate on partnership track. She was an excellent lawyer. But she had a problem. Grasshopper didn’t know how to develop business.

So Grasshopper went to the office of the firm’s top rainmaker, a soft-spoken attorney known as “the Senator.”

“Tell me, Senator,” said Grasshopper, sitting down in a finely upholstered chair. “What is one thing I can do to begin to develop business?”

Looking up from the brief he was editing, the Senator said, “Why not start with your friends?”

“My friends?” said Grasshopper. “But Senator, I’m uncomfortable asking friends for business. It feels like I’m asking for favors. I’d rather scoop out my eyeballs with a shrimp fork.”

“I think you misunderstand business development, Grasshopper,” said the Senator, chuckling. “Clients don’t pick lawyers as a favor. They pick lawyers who understand their business and can help them in some important way.”

Grasshopper was silent for a moment and then nodded. “How should I start, Senator? I want to learn the way to grow clients.”

“Tell me, Grasshopper. Do you have any friends that work for companies that might hire this law firm?”

“Well, there’s one, but I don’t know whether ...”

“Tell me about this friend,” said the Senator.

“Well,” said Grasshopper, “her name is Butterfly, and she’s an associate counsel for environmental matters at National Gigantic Corp. She’s considered a rising star. We were in law school together. We see each other fairly often. She’s dating a friend of mine.”

The Senator turned to his computer, called up the firm’s Web site, and clicked on the “Seminars and Events” menu. “I

see we are hosting an Environmental Issues Roundtable with the EPA’s head of litigation,” he said. “Phone your friend and invite her to the roundtable.”

Grasshopper sat silent for a few moments. “Oh, I see. Instead of asking for a favor, I offer Butterfly something she values, a chance to become a more informed litigator.”

“You’re getting it, Grasshopper. And now I have a question for you. What will you do once she arrives?”

“Ask her for legal work?”

“I’d rather you scooped out your eyes with a shrimp fork,” mumbled the Senator. “No, Grasshopper. At the end of the session, say to her, ‘I’m glad you could come today. I’d like to have lunch with you sometime soon and learn what you’re up to at National Gigantic Corp. Are you interested?’”

Grasshopper smiled. “I get it,” she said. “She’ll have lunch with me because I’ve just done her a favor.”

“Sort of,” the Senator said. “The invitation to the roundtable shows that you’re interested in being her resource. Most in-house lawyers are happy to have resources to help them with their job. She’ll have lunch with you because she values your company.”

“What should I do at the lunch?” asked Grasshopper.

“Ask about her business—and listen,” said the Senator. “Let her talk about her challenges. Great business developers listen. They understand that if you listen carefully enough, the prospect will tell you how to get her business.”

“She’ll tell me how to get her business?”

“Sure,” said the Senator. “Maybe she’ll tell you about challenges in training their employees to obey certain laws. Or maybe there is a compliance problem. Just listen. She’ll probably reveal several ways our firm could be a resource.”

“If I hear about one of these problems,

should I ask for the business then?”

The Senator smiled again. “Chances are there won’t be any pending opportunities. Just remember her key challenges for when you follow up.”

“I get it,” said Grasshopper. “I’ll then begin sending her articles and newsletters

all aimed at helping her deal with her challenges. Maybe I’ll even write a brief analysis of relevant new laws.”

“And with every follow-up,” the Senator added, “include a letter that says you’d love to be a resource should the opportunity arise.”

“This sounds exciting, Senator. But what do I do while I’m waiting for her to finally hire me as a lawyer?”

“Go looking for more Butterflies, Grasshopper,” said the Senator, turning back to his brief. “Go looking for more Butterflies.” 