



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by Stephen Seckler

### Career Lessons from a Law Firm Dissolution

In the coming months, the legal community will continue to speculate about what caused the demise of Testa Hurwitz and Thibeault. Some will say that it was the greed of the partners who had the best client relationships and therefore controlled the most legal work. Others will say that the firm became unglued with the death of Dick Testa, a charismatic leader who insisted that everyone work for the common good of the firm. Still others will blame the firm's over-reliance on one industry (i.e., technology).

In fact, no one will ever know for sure what was the root cause of Testa's failure. While the dramatic turn of Testa's fortunes provides us with some good food for thought about what it takes to keep a partnership profitable and sustainable, I believe that, more important, Testa's downfall provides some very valuable career lessons for all attorneys.

Lawyers in other large firms might like to think that a "Testa" could never happen at their firms ("We are much more diversified." "Our business is spread around the country." "Our firm culture does not depend so heavily on one individual."). The truth is that what happened at Testa could happen at any firm. Testa's folding is simply another warning to all of us about the ways in which the world has changed.

So what are the career lessons to take away from the dissolution of Testa? A partner who lived through the demise of another prominent Boston law firm put it this way: He said that never again would he allow himself to become complacent.

Put in other terms, lawyers cannot expect to have career protection simply by being great lawyers and doing great work. It is critical to develop strong relationships, both inside and outside the firm. Developing good relationships inside the firm is important because in some measure, these relationships will impact the quality of work that you receive. But they are also important because when a partner leaves a firm, he/she usually has the chance to bring some associates along. Associates who have been more political and developed stronger relationships with these partners can increase the likelihood that the partner will be able to bring them to the new firm.

Developing good relationships outside of the firm is equally important for a number of reasons. In the event that you find yourself jobless, the relationships that you already have in the legal community will give you a head start in identifying other jobs. More important, over time, it is the relationships that you develop outside of the firm which will lead to business, and it is a book of business which will make you most marketable in the event that you need to seek a new home.

Testa Hurwitz and Thibault was once a great law firm with great lawyers and a great professional staff. Whether you look at what happened at Testa from afar and say that this could never happen at your firm or whether you are thinking "There but for the grace of God go I," it is time to get out your Rolodex and start meeting people. Take time out from your billable work, and spend time on what Stephen Covey would call Quadrant II activities (i.e., things which are important, but not urgent). For most of us, the career crisis will never hit. But for those of us who are unfortunate enough to have to go through the death of a law firm, it will be that much easier to recover if we start planning right now.

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