

Bulletin



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What Can Lawyers Learn
from Surviving a (Simulated)
Plane Crash Together? / 11

What Do We Know About
JD Advantage Jobs? / 4



Finding the
Right Mentor / 8

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 2 From the President: AI in Law by David Montoya
- 4 NALP Research: What Do We Know About JD Advantage Jobs? By Judith N. Collins
- 6 The Intersection Between Innovative Technology & Employee Engagement: A Central Theme at the 2017 PDI by Andy Colón
- 8 Newcomer's Corner: Finding the Right Mentor by Lindsay Howard
- 9 Call for Nominations — Words of Wisdom by Beth Moeller and Kisha Nunez
- 11 What Can Lawyers Learn from Surviving a (Simulated) Plane Crash Together? By Virginia Melvin
- 14 Building an Effective Tribal Court Clerkship Program by Jason Gray and Devra Hermosilla
- 16 Looking Forward to the 2018 NALP Annual Education Conference in South Florida By Melanie Priddy
- 18 What's Wrong with Me? By Ellen Schlesinger
- 21 Converting a CV into a Résumé by Melanija Radnovic
- 23 Finding Motivation — Advising Our Students to Take Initiative in their Career and Professional Development by Paula Gluzman
- 26 Beyond Resumes and Cover Letters: Using the Classroom to Help Prepare Students for Public Interest Careers by Glory McLaughlin

What Can Lawyers Learn From Surviving a (Simulated) Plane Crash Together?

By Virginia Melvin

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Last spring, about 100 of our firm's senior associates from around the world arrived in New York City for a senior associate conference. Very quickly, they crash-landed in a frigid, desolate landscape in subarctic Canada in a Subarctic Survival Situation™ developed by Human Synergistics® International¹. They landed far from civilization, surrounded by arctic swamps and high snow drifts, in freezing weather, and with no means of communication to the outside world. As the plane sunk, they were able to salvage only 15 items to aid their survival.

Working in groups, the associates had to handle some general decision-making issues, including whether to stay in place or venture away from the crash site. Travelling meant knowing how to navigate, being able to traverse rivers, bogs, and other treacherous snowy terrain, and finding enough food to sustain them. Staying in place meant knowing how to create shelter and heat, find food, and communicate with possible rescue planes. Once they made these initial decisions, the associates had to rank the items salvaged from the plane, first individually and then as a group, in order of importance for survival.

The obvious question of this exercise is whether one is better off making survival decisions on one's own or by harnessing the power of a group. Not surprisingly, even among office-bound lawyers with strong personalities, groups nearly always outperform individuals. The not-so-obvious lessons about team building and leadership were plentiful as well. Here are five things that we learned from surviving together in the tundra.

The obvious question of this exercise is whether one is better off making survival decisions on one's own or by harnessing the power of a group.

1. The group is indeed stronger than the individual.

This exercise clearly demonstrated that working collaboratively yields better results than working independently in problem

solving situations. In our case, every one of our 16 teams outscored its individual members. Although this idea has been around for years, our participants were experiencing it first-hand and were surprised by the results. Several said that they were convinced that they had done better individually and that they chose to just "go along with the group" in ranking some of the items to keep the exercise moving. "I was truly shocked that the group score was better. I was absolutely convinced of the importance of a steel wrench over candles," said one of the participants.

2. You have to listen to lead.

Many young lawyers subconsciously pick up ideas about leadership from the senior lawyers with whom they work. These ideas are usually focused on action, commands, and problem solving. Rarely do they mention listening as an important quality of a good leader. Yet, in a service profession, it may be the most important quality. If you do not hear your client, a judge, or opposing coun-

Continued on page 12

sel, you cannot respond effectively. If you substitute your own thoughts for theirs, you risk making wrong decisions and wasting time and resources. If you do not ask questions, you may miss key information. More importantly, you can easily damage your relationship with your client.

In our simulation, the groups that were the most successful were the groups where everyone was given a voice. These groups

were quick to uncover the hidden knowledge and experience of their members, who ranged from Eagle Scouts to readers of worst-case scenario books. They asked each other questions to elicit helpful information. In one of these groups, a fairly quiet associate was the one to make an eloquent argument for keeping an aircraft inner tube, which ended up being a critical piece of the solution. This group excelled at ensuring that everyone, even the introverts, were contributing their ideas.

3. You need to stop and think. Then plan. Then act.

Lawyers are distinguished from the general public by their abnormally-strong sense of urgency, which translates into impatience, a need to get things done, and a sense of immediacyⁱⁱ. Dr. Larry Richard, a leading researcher in the area of lawyer personalities, describes this as “people who charge around like they are on their way to a fire. They may finish others’ sentences, jump to conclusions, be impulsive. [They are] intense and results-oriented. They seek efficiency and economy in everything from conversations to case management to relationships.”

Yet, survival experts caution that the most important thing to do in a crisis is stop, collect yourself, control your emotions, and think, as rationally as possible. Take inventory of your supplies—everything is a potential survival tool. Run through all the ways that something could be used before ruling any one out. Expand your mindset to include innovative ways to use supplies for alternative purposes. Then start planning. And, finally, act.

There was no doubting Dr. Richard’s assessment of lawyers was accurate in our simulation experience. The sense of urgency enabled some groups to make quick decisions at the beginning of the exercise, with different results. These groups tended to be dominated by one or two people talking and deciding at the same time and instructing others what to take. This take-charge approach shut down others in their groups causing them to either withdraw or dig in on their positions.

The teams that finished the process early, typically the take-action groups, did not work effectively. According the Human Synergistics International™ assessment, these groups did not make good use of rational and interpersonal processes. Instead they tended to jump ahead to solutions (usually of poor quality) before fully understanding the situation and the alternatives. Not surprisingly, these teams scored poorly.

4. You need the right mindset.

Survival experts warn that crisis situations can trigger a primal instinct to survive, fueled by fear and panic, all of which can



block rational thinking. One of the first things you have to do, they advise, is master your emotions. Studies show that people in survival mode who consciously adopt a positive attitude in their thinking are more creative, integrative, flexible, and open to information. Creativity and resilience are essential to survival and, it turns out, to productive team work in a survival simulation.

In our simulation, although there was no survival-related fear or panic, and no one was in shock from a real crash, there were other emotions that clouded rational judgment: a strong competitive desire to win, a nervousness about meeting and impressing colleagues, and impatience to “get on with it.”

Without a doubt, the groups that were relaxed, engaged, and inclusive were able to reach agreement much more readily than some of the other groups. They were enjoying the creative process of analyzing possible uses of the salvaged items. These groups were joking, relaxed, and bonding as they picked up new “survival skills.” In contrast, the competitive, action-driven

groups had fractured into the dominant members intent on winning and disengaged members who kept their own objections to themselves. The negative mindset was slowing them down, leading to even more frustration.

5. Being a “first among equals” is harder than being a designated leader.

In a survival situation, no one is “elected” leader. The role of leader simply falls naturally on one or two people. In our simulation, there were no such “obvious” choices for leaders; there were no partners, no clients, no colleagues who had more legal experience. The senior associates were equals, and the “leaders” of the groups that performed best acted as a “first among equals”ⁱⁱⁱ rather than as hierarchical leaders with the power to dictate to others.

These “first among equals” leaders were open to learning from everyone, and they facilitated, rather than directed, discussion. Their groups in turn sought clarity and provided input. By encouraging everyone to speak, they quickly uncovered hidden expertise and carefully evaluated the ratio-

nal arguments of those with little wilderness experience but sound judgment. Because of the more flattened team structure, these teams were more easily able to build a consensus, with everyone buying in to the decisions or at least being able to live with the decisions. Decisions in these groups were not made by majority vote.

Leadership styles need to be flexible. In high value, complex situations, for example, this approach is more valuable in generating good outcomes. But for more routinized work or deadline-driven work, a designated leader model may have greater efficiency. In the real world, most client matters are staffed with a designated leader (the partner) who makes the decisions that the team implements. These leaders, however, should be ready to adapt a *primus inter pares* model to elicit the best of their team to solve more complicated, high impact problems more efficiently and with better outcomes for the client.

So, how did our senior associates fare in planning their survival? Not that well. As compared with other groups of people, our

senior associates did as well as college counselors, better than carpenters, but worse than salespeople, college students, teachers, and police sergeants. Of these groups, salespeople and police sergeants did the best. But our associates, without exception, did have a rewarding experience working together to learn that you don’t always lead from the front or follow from behind. ■

ENDNOTE

ⁱ Human Synergistics® and Subarctic Survival Situation™ are trademarks of Human Synergistics International. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ “Herding Cats: The Lawyer Personality Revealed,” Dr. Larry Richard (2002)

ⁱⁱⁱ “First among equals,” also known as “*primus inter pares*,” is a type of leadership style that has its roots in ancient Rome. The Roman Republic was an early example of organizing a state without a king or emperor. Instead, one senator was selected to be the “*princeps senatus*,” or a first senator among equals for a period of time. The role, considered a great honor, gave the designated senator precedence in the Senate, and he would usually be the first to speak in senatorial debates. He also ran the meetings and maintained order.