
Law Firms are People, Too

By Martin S. Frenkel

It has often been said that the culture of an organization is set by example from the top. Companies, like people, have personalities which take on the look and feel of their leadership. Steve Jobs imbued Apple with a culture of innovation, Larry Page and Sergey Brin (founders of Google) embodied the company with an open and non-hierarchical management style encouraging maximum creativity, and so on.

The fourth edition of my column regarding influential life experiences is about providing a brief glimpse into the personality of my firm as derived from Michael Maddin – one of the key founders of Maddin Hauser – and his impact on the culture of the company he helped create.

Michael, or “Mickey” as he is affectionately known, is the son of a lawyer and brother to another one of our firm’s founding partners, Richard. In 1982, Michael and Richard led their former firm into a merger with another firm led by Mark Hauser. Maddin Hauser was born! I am proud to call all of these lawyers my partners.

When I joined Maddin Hauser nearly 20 years ago, Mickey had already been one of the firm’s two managing partners for well over a decade. He wasn’t that old (and still isn’t!), but to my young eyes, he seemed it then! From the start, I knew there was something different about Mickey. I’d like to share a few of my impressions of Mickey and his impact on our firm.

On my second day with Maddin Hauser, I was at the office at the crack of dawn trying to impress. It was around 6:30 in the morning and still dark. There was Mickey energetically walking through the hall only to stop at my door to greet the new associate. Rather than simply stopping for the perfunctory hello, he noticed that the desk chair that I was sitting in was tilting and seemingly about to break. Mickey’s response? He took his jacket off, flipped the chair over on the ground, and began working to fix it! After about 10 minutes, he concluded it couldn’t be

repaired and I had a brand new chair waiting for me the next morning – care of the firm’s managing partner. The lesson Mickey taught that day was humility – never being too high up the ladder to assist someone else a few rungs down.

Most great organizations have various founding principles. Some of Maddin Hauser’s principles are embodied in what we like to call “Mickeyisms.” These principles are practical wisdom with a touch of Yogi Berra (i.e. “90% of the game is half mental”). One of my favorite Mickey sayings is, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.” (Apparently a paraphrase of a line in Alice and Wonderland). After spending a few early years trying to decipher this, I determined that it was about strategic thinking. Having a plan. As the years have gone on, this very concise “truism” has found its way into every aspect of practice – from how we conduct meetings to how we handle a client project. It keeps one focused on having a framework for reaching a specified goal, rather than taking a “stream of consciousness” or meandering approach to problem solving.

September 11, 2001. A day about which we all have both personal and shared recollections. On that morning, I was conducting an hour long telephone call with a client regarding a commercial lease dispute. As the call went on, people began milling in the hallways. As the call continued, more and more people began running through those same hallways crying. Eventually, the call ended and I found many of the members of my firm gathered around a TV – crying and in shock. For all of us who witnessed that morning, it will always be a horrible memory. But, one other memory sticks out. There was one steady hand, one consoling force that morning, and it was Mickey – handing out hugs, kind words, and reassurance that the country would get through the horror of that day. Then, with everyone simply wanting to leave to go find and hold their children, Mickey’s (and the rest of our leadership I might add) compassion shown through with the firm sending anyone home who wanted to leave to do just that.

One final memory – perhaps personally one of my proudest moments. I had just made equity partner in the firm after persevering through a grueling personal year for me. I was invited to a large party (more like a gala) thrown by a friend. Mickey was invited too. Looking out over the ballroom, I saw Mickey weaving his way over to me. He pulled me aside – telling me that he was well aware of the hard year I had. Then, he gave me a hug and told me he was proud of me. The sincerity that Mickey demonstrated in that moment means as much to me as the highest professional achievement.

Humility. Strategic thinking. Leadership and compassion. Sincerity. Mickey has truly given the firm that bears his name a wonderful legacy.

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