

## Introduction

# Smoke in the Air

The phone went off at three in the morning and roused me from a deep sleep. I normally silence my phone at night, but for some reason, this call came through. I sat up in bed and listened intently to the urgent voice at the other end.

I knew it was bad.

I jumped into the car and headed out. It was a hot July night, and I sped down the highway with the windows open. The road was empty, the way it is in movies after an apocalypse. Nothing seemed real to me, but this wasn't a dream. It wasn't a movie.

About a mile from my exit, I could smell the smoke in the air. As I got close, I could see the night sky lit up with flashing emergency lights. Sirens were wailing. As I sped down the street to my law office, I could see the fire trucks and the firemen racing around the parking lot, shouting and pointing and carrying equipment and running back and forth. Hoses snaked across the asphalt, and a bitter, black cloud hung in the air, shrouding the light from streetlamps.

Then I saw the flames.

They engulfed my building.

Laurie, my secretary, found me and we embraced, crying. The full impact started to wash over me, making it difficult to catch my breath.

Our staff would have nowhere to work.

Our files. Our cases. Our clients. It seemed our legal practice would be lost. All of it.

How would we recover from this? Could we ever recover?

## The Second Alarm

Fast forward three years.

At this time, Sid, the prominent Detroit attorney I mentioned in the prologue, sent my firm 70 percent of our personal injury cases. I built my firm on Sid's referrals. We treated his cases like gold, giving them nothing but the highest level of service and attention. We paid him more than \$4 million a year in referral fees.

Then one day in 2011, he called and said we needed to talk. Today.

"I'll come to you," I said.

"No," he replied. "I'll come to you."

He'd never been to our offices before. What was going on?

I knew another fire was brewing.

He arrived a short time later. My receptionist walked him down to my office. He came in, shut the door, and sat on my couch. There was no small talk.

"We're changing direction," he said, his cold gaze leveled on me. "I won't be sending you any more cases."

I was stunned. I don't remember what I said, but I do remember my visitor had little else to say by way of explanation. He rose from the couch and walked out, leaving me to calculate the damage. Seventy percent of our business had just disappeared in an instant. What was I going to do? Did I need to start laying people off? Today?

# Fireproof

These two devastating blows—the fire in 2008 and being fired by Sid in 2011—threatened to destroy all I had built up over the years since I'd gone into private practice in 1995.

At the time of the fire, I was managing a firm of about two dozen attorneys, paralegals, and administrative personnel. We were on a tremendous trajectory. My firm had grown each year, and after several years of managing every aspect of the operation myself, I'd added some structure and business practices to our office. Those changes freed me to focus on cultivating new business and training our staff to provide the same level of service I had always delivered.

These twin tragedies threatened everything. But like all fires, they also cleared the way for something new.

They provided an impetus to change how we ran our law firm and how we conducted business. How we hired and fired. How we measured our success. How we handled cases and served our clients. The fires brought me new people, new strategies, and wild success.

It's the kind of success that any lawyer—even someone with a small firm—can replicate if they follow the practices we developed in the wake of these calamities. We found a way to fireproof our law office.

Since that fire destroyed our office, my firm has grown by about 25 percent a year. We've gone from an office of about twenty-five people and \$17 million in total settlements and verdicts to an office of 150 employees, including fifty attorneys, and more than \$160 million in settlements and verdicts in 2018. We're now the largest personal injury firm in the state of Michigan and have been for several years.

Since Sid fired us, we have become one of the best-known law firms in the state, with an \$8 million annual advertising budget that has allowed us to shape and hone our image and ensure that the people who need us can find us. The advertising we launched after Sid fired

us has made me a household name in Michigan and has given me the freedom to focus exclusively on what I love to do and what I'm good at.

Ironically, after Sid cut us off, we went on to be his largest competitor in our Designated Marketing Area (DMA). I'm not sure he thought of this or wondered if I had the audacity to go head-to-head with him, but that's what I did, and it's paid off handsomely for my firm and me.

I also enjoyed my freedom after parting company with Sid. I was free from relying on disloyal people who didn't care about me or my firm. I was free from being dependent on anyone else and was able to make and choose my destiny. It took this firing for me to realize I needed and wanted my autonomy. I am not sure I would have ever made the leap had he not pushed me into it. I am so grateful he did.

Unlike most lawyers, we no longer worry about where our next case is coming from. Because we run our office like a business, we set specific annual goals and use practices to ensure we're on pace throughout the year to reach those goals. We track our numbers carefully. I know how many cases are likely to come in each year, how much we'll make from those cases on average, and how long it will take the settlement funds to arrive. I know precisely how many cases we refer out to other lawyers, and I know which of those lawyers is most likely to take a case. In January of each year, John, my chief operating officer, can predict to within one-tenth of 1 percent how much our firm will make that year. He can do the same with my personal income. Many people in our office used to laugh and roll their eyes and place bets when John came up with his projections. But for twelve straight years, he has only gotten more and more accurate, and we have stopped questioning him.

Do I look back with regret and dismay at the adversities that rocked my law firm?

No.

I look back with extreme gratitude.

# Practice Law like a Business

If you're at all like I was in the years before our fire, you have no idea how to run your law firm like a business. You know how to run it like a law firm.

You don't know how to advertise or market properly for new clients or how to organize your office to ensure it runs efficiently and profitably. You've never had an executive team, and you've never hired a third-party business coach to help you to figure out what you want your law practice to be, how you want it to grow, and what tactics you're going to use to get there.

Why *would* you know how to do any of this?

We're lawyers, after all. We know how to try cases and spot issues. We earned law degrees, not MBAs. We're clueless about things like key performance metrics, CFOs and COOs, and human resource departments. No one taught us how to run an effective meeting, let alone set business goals. Terms like *rocks* and *forecasting* don't mean much to us. We don't collect data, and we wouldn't know how to analyze it anyway.

We're too busy to think about these things, and we're skeptical of anyone who might suggest we should.

That's okay. Skepticism is good. You have to have a healthy dose of skepticism to succeed in law.

So let me throw some numbers at you.

Since my firm began embracing the principles and practices outlined in this book, it has not only increased profit but has also blossomed in many other ways. When you walk into our offices, you think you're entering a workspace in Silicon Valley. We've created work teams for lawyers, and we use market research and data to determine not only when to advertise but also where to run our ads. We've adopted a hiring process that ensures we hire only

those who embody our core values, and we use testing to help determine who's a good fit and where they can best help our firm. We pay our people top dollar, and we have an accountability program that ensures they deliver.

As a result, my firm's revenue is thirteen times higher than it was in 2007. My personal income is ten times higher than it was ten years ago, and I work less. I have time to pursue more of my interests while relying on my chief operating officer to ensure that all the trains run on time loaded with happy passengers. I have the time to drive my daughters to school in the morning and make their lunches.

## What You Can Expect

I know, I know. You think I'm selling you something and you're wondering what's the catch. There's no catch.

My goal with this book is to share the vital principles I've learned in the last fifteen years about running a law office like a business. I've broken our process down into five distinct steps, each detailed in its own chapter. You may think you don't have enough time to adopt some of these practices, but following the principles in this book will give you back your time. You'll have time to focus on doing what you love and cultivating the clients you crave. You will work less and make more.

Here's an overview of what you'll learn:

- **Chapter 1: Know Thyself.** What do the best law firms have in common? They have the best people. They have discovered their core values, and they live those values every day. This first step unleashes the growth potential for your firm while giving you a more lucrative and rewarding life.
- **Chapter 2: Hiring, Firing, and Paying.** If you're still following traditional hiring and compensation practices, it's time to change. The second step is to learn how to use

testing to find the right people and incentives to ensure those great employees continually produce and improve.

- **Chapter 3: The Jumbotron Principle.** How do you know if you're winning when you don't know what the score is? The third step in running your firm like a business is to create a Legal Jumbotron—a simple system that measures key metrics and tells you day to day how much you're making and whether you're ahead or behind your projections.
- **Chapter 4: Run Your Business like You Run Your Biggest Case.** To win your biggest case, you need a carefully executed plan. Your law firm is no different. You need to know who, what, when, where, why, and how. This is step four.
- **Chapter 5: Cherry Garcia Beats Vanilla.** What makes you the person who people want to hire? When I look out at the attorneys who advertise, I see vanilla flavors. When I advertise, I want people to know I'm a Cherry Garcia guy, a flavor that stands out. Step five in our process will help you learn about your local market and help you develop advertising that works.
- **Conclusion: "He Who Represents Himself Has a Fool for a Client."** Abraham Lincoln said this about lawyers, but he could have been talking about any business endeavor. A lawyer who tries to adopt business principles without outside help from a coach will struggle.

## Predictable and Profitable

I'm not here to regale you with stories about my biggest cases. My law firm has indeed enjoyed crazy success, but my real goal in writing this book is to share with you some simple ideas for running your firm like a business so you can reap the rewards.

I'm not offering you vague or theoretical practices. Instead, these are road-tested strategies that have worked for us and for businesses everywhere. Many of the techniques I'll describe

in the coming chapters have been around for years, but it's rare to find them in use at most law practices. We adopted these practices years ago, and since then, we've supercharged them and refined them to work flawlessly for any law firm. I know these practices work because we've seen them work for us year after year.

They'll work for you, too.

Everything in this book is within your grasp. I'll outline the basic steps, give you the essential tools, and explain how to apply them to the practice of law. I've also set up a website ([855mikewins.com/fireproof](http://855mikewins.com/fireproof)) for you that includes worksheets and best practices for following the principles we describe in this book. There is a ton of useful information there and we're always adding more.

As easy and practical as we'll make it, this process will likely require you to rethink how you approach your law practice. You may want to restructure your office, change your hiring practices, build a better leadership team, and distribute your work differently.

Whether you're a small office of just three people or a growing practice with a dozen people, adopting the principles we describe in this book will make your firm more predictable as well as more profitable. I took action when I had twenty employees, but I should have started sooner.

My advice is to stop making excuses. Read on, and find out how you can change your office, get your life back, and make more money in the process.

Find out how to be fireproof.