

From the President's Desk

Chart A Different Course Be the Opposite of Indifferent



The Lumineers have a line in *Stubborn Love*: The opposite of love is indifference. They borrowed it from Elie Wiesel, who learned it the hardest way a man can. Wherever it came from, it is right. And it is right about law firms.

We like to believe partnerships die loudly. A compensation fight. A defection to the firm across the street. An origination dispute that turns personal, then turns into litigation, then turns into a story other lawyers tell at bar functions for the next decade.

That is not how it usually goes. Firms die quietly. And if you run one, the quiet is the thing you should be listening for.

You will not hear it happen

Two partners pass in the hallway and do not greet one another. Not out of hostility – there is no hostility. Seat them at the same table and they will be pleasant for an hour. Neither one could tell you a single thing about what the other is working on, or worried about, or building toward.

They are polite. They are not interested.

Politeness is what indifference wears to the office. It is frictionless, it is free, and it can run for years without a single complaint, because there is nothing to complain about. Nobody was rude. Nobody did anything.

Underneath the pleasantness, each lawyer is watching exactly one number, and it is his own. His stack. His originations. His line on the comp sheet. That is not a partnership. That is lawyers sharing a lease.

What it looks like on a Tuesday

Beyond the hallway, indifference arrives as a series of small non-events. You have seen every one of them:

- The memo circulated to shareholders that draws no response. Not one.
- The practice group meeting rescheduled twice, then quietly off the calendar altogether.
- The associate in their fourth year who has never once been asked what they want their career to look like.
- The client survey that comes back with three out of five responses and gets filed.
- The partner whose collections dropped forty percent last year and whom nobody has asked about, because asking would be awkward and not asking is easy.

None of these are a crisis. But each one is a decision – a decision not to engage – and the decision costs nothing today. That is exactly the problem. The bill arrives later, all at once, and by then the firm has forgotten what it purchased.

Courtesy is cheap. Respect is not.

Everything above sits on one thing. Take it away and nothing else holds.

Respect. Not courtesy – courtesy is cheap, and it is frequently a substitute for the real article. I mean the settled, genuine belief that the person across the table is competent, is trying, and is worth your time even when you disagree with him. Especially then.

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Where respect exists, candor follows, because there is no point in being honest with someone whose potential reaction you have already discounted. Encouragement follows, because you cannot credibly praise work you do not believe in. Support follows, because no one extends themselves for a person they have privately written off.

Remove respect and the structure comes down in order. Communication goes first. It gets careful, then formal, then rare. Encouragement goes next. Support goes last, and its absence is the one everybody finally notices, usually at the worst possible moment.

Then it gets quiet.

Consider the partner who does not congratulate his colleague on the defense verdict. He is not too busy. He is doing arithmetic. He has decided that credit is a fixed quantity, that praising someone else spends down his own account, and so he says nothing. The silence reads as indifference and functions as indifference, whatever it actually was.

Confident people do not run that arithmetic. They encourage, they do it out loud, and they do it first. A lawyer secure in their own worth can afford to say in front of the whole room that someone else did excellent work, because they are not keeping score in a game where they believe the points are scarce. That is not softness. It is the most reliable indicator of strength you will find in a professional organization, and it costs nothing but the willingness to notice.

A team is not a group of people who share an EIN, a coffee machine, and a conference room. It is a group of people actively invested in one another, getting better together. Respect is the foundation. Support is the mechanism. Encouragement is the currency. The firms that have all three are, almost without exception, the firms whose leaders had enough confidence to give them away.

And here is the part that should worry you: a quiet firm looks well-run from the outside. No drama. No meetings that run long. No difficult conversations. Do not congratulate yourself for quiet. Quiet is not peace. Quiet is the sound a partnership makes when its people have stopped bothering.

Attention is not a feeling. It is a calendar.

The good news – and there is good news – is that indifference is the most reversible of organizational diseases. It responds to attention. Attention is not a mood you summon. It is a set of behaviors, and behaviors can be scheduled.

Six that work:

1. Ask for a response, then notice who does not give one. The non-response is the data.
2. Put the practice group meeting back on the calendar and hold it even when the agenda is thin. Especially then.

3. Call the associate. Ask what they want to be doing in five years. Write down the answer.
4. Call the client who gave you the three and ask what the two missing points were. They will tell you.
5. Praise good work by name, in front of other people, the same week it happened. Not at the annual meeting. The same week.
6. Say the uncomfortable thing in the room where it matters instead of in the parking lot afterward.

None of this is sophisticated. That is precisely why it goes undone. Sophisticated problems get task forces. Simple problems get postponed or ignored.

The part you cannot do by yourself

Here is the difficulty, and every managing partner reading this already knows it.

You cannot hear your own quiet. You are inside the building. The hallway sounds normal to you because it is the only hallway you walk down. Your compensation model looks rational because you helped build it. Your succession plan looks like a plan because it sits in a binder with your name on the cover. The blind spot is not a character flaw. It is a structural condition of running the place.

Somebody from outside has to tell you. Preferably somebody with no stake in your comp sheet, no interest in your equity, and no particular reason to be polite to you.

What Primerus is for

As a society of independent law firms, Primerus has no mutual partnership agreement binding us together, no compensation committee, no shared letterhead. But like any law firm, what we do have is a set of relationships that people can either tend or neglect.

So let me be plain about what this society is. We are not a directory. We are not a badge for your website's footer. Primerus is a companion in the development of lawyers and law firms.

That is a specific claim, and it means specific things:

- It is the call you make before the pitch, to the member who pitched that same client last quarter.
- It is the firm two states over that solved the succession problem you are staring at – three years ago – and will hand you the whole playbook over breakfast.
- It is somebody taking your third-year associate to lunch in a city where they know no one.
- It is a sounding board at 6:00 p.m. on a Thursday night, when the decision is yours alone, but you would rather not make it alone.

Primerus firms have already made many of the mistakes available to you. They have run the comp experiment, botched

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the lateral hire, rebuilt the intake process, and survived the partner who left with the book. That is the asset. It is sitting there. Use it.

A companion cannot be indifferent. That is the definition of the word. It is also the whole of what we offer, and – this is the part that matters – it only works in both directions. A society of members waiting to be served is just a directory with dues.

So:

Show up at the meeting. Answer the referral request the day it arrives, not the week it arrives. Take the call from the firm in London or Cleveland even when there is no fee in it for you. Know the lawyers here well enough to send them your best client.

And when a colleague here does something excellent, say so. Out loud. First.

Be the lawyer who is the antithesis of indifferent: Engaged, generous, responsive, reliable, and intensely capable. In other words, a Primerus lawyer.

Christian Stegmaier

**President and Chief Executive Officer-Designate
The International Society of Primerus Law Firms**

