

by Rita Alli



Opportunity Calls

Ten years ago, I received a call from the President of the Puget Sound Chapter of ALA – a call I was not expecting.



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She wanted to advise me that its Nominating Committee had met, and although I had expressed an interest in serving as Education Chair, the Committee had a different role in mind – President-Elect. My immediate reaction was high anxiety (I was practically hyperventilating) due to my overwhelming fear of public speaking. In this role, I knew I would have to stand at the podium during Chapter meetings and events in front of members, managing partners and business partners. But another thought quickly followed – what a *great opportunity*. Looking past the challenges, I recognized and accepted this opportunity, along with the others that have presented themselves through ALA, as the most significant contribution to my own professional development. In my first message in *ALA News* magazine as President of our Association, I want to share my thoughts about our profession's current challenges and *opportunities*.

According to Kenneth Blanchard, Co-Founder of the Ken Blanchard Companies, "The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority." Our industry is facing some of the biggest challenges we have seen in decades. Since January 2008, more than 14,000 legal professionals and staff reportedly have lost their jobs. Many of those who remain employed are faced with broader scopes, higher expectations, fewer resources and stagnant or reduced pay. It is stunning to reflect on how quickly the legal profession went from an environment of excess and unlimited work to layoffs, salary freezes and increased competition for legal work. And now we are moving past the initial reactionary phase toward reshaping our firms' business models.

We all know that law firms and legal departments are slow to change. With strong client bases, healthy revenues and steady streams of good talent, there have been no reasons to change – until now. And now is our *opportunity!* As legal administrators, we can influence the direction and speed of change within our organizations by refreshing the approaches we take to executing our responsibilities.

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Our clients, those who purchase our services, require that we change. They are asking for higher value, including lower or alternative fee arrangements. As stated in the ACC (Association of Corporate Counsel) Value Challenge, clients want firms to “reconnect legal cost to value.” In some cases, this new reality threatens our relationships with long-standing clients; if we don’t meet their expectations, someone else will. More than ever before, we need to find ways to keep our clients’ satisfaction levels high. This is our opportunity to influence change:

- Create and demonstrate added value through delivery of services and solutions at a reasonable cost.
- Create and demonstrate added value through implementation of systems for soliciting and responding to client feedback.

Our lawyers, those who produce the services that generate income, are expected to develop business. That trend has been long in the making, but now it is crucial. For most lawyers, business development does not come naturally, and it is not what they learned when they went to law school. This is our opportunity to influence change:

- Establish business development training and coaching.
- Mobilize client service teams.
- Familiarize lawyers with social media tools.

Our staff members, without whom firms’ operations would come to a screeching halt, are being asked to do more with less. They are feeling the loss of some of the perks that they have come to know and expect. Most are grateful to be employed, but we need to find ways to demonstrate appreciation and reward merit or our strongest talent will leave. This is our opportunity to influence change:

- Find ways to boost morale.
- Acknowledge and reward high performers.
- Build a culture of internal client service.

Yes, these are challenging times. I encourage you to look past these challenges and find opportunities – each of us has the opportunity to initiate and influence change. Our Association is here to deliver the resources, tools and education you need.

Opportunity calls. Are you ready? ♦



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