



LESSON DESCRIPTIONS

To improve learning and ensure consistency in presentation, all LeaderSkills lessons follow a similar format. You can access a sample lesson from the LeaderSkills page of the website.

The lessons currently available are listed on the following pages by the five general categories:

- Business Development
- Client Service
- Firm Management
- Personal Development
- Supervision

We also have a series of LeaderSkills lessons, sold as a set, on Engagement Management.

A brief summary of the content of each lesson accompanies the listing.

EXCEPTIONAL ENGAGEMENT MANAGEMENT: A COMPLETE CLIENT SERVICE MODEL

(Six Lesson Series)

Firms that have successfully built and maintained a reputation for exceptional service in today's highly competitive, demanding business world didn't get there by accident. They chose to be where they are. Their choice to enjoy such a reputation included much more than a keen desire to give great service, although unwavering determination undoubtedly played an important role in their success. Their choice encompassed careful planning, many wise choices between alternatives, and a firm-wide commitment to consistently—each day, every hour—perform at an exceptional level. The choice made by these firms also required a thorough understanding of essential steps and important principles for ensuring that clients have frequent “Wow!” experiences and come away from every interaction feeling reinforced in their choice of trusted advisors.

This series is designed to teach those steps, along with vital principles every firm member must know and enthusiastically live each day. Each lesson builds on the previous, carefully guiding participants through a five-step process for successfully managing client engagements. Sold only as a set, the series contains a lesson on each of the following steps in the engagement management process, plus an introductory lesson:

- Defining the Engagement
- Planning the Engagement
- Performing the Engagement
- Delivering the Engagement
- Evaluating the Engagement

ASKING CLIENTS FOR ADDITIONAL BUSINESS

Opportunities to secure additional work occur hundreds of times each year in most accounting firms. Providing additional or expanded services to known, valued clients rather than seeking new work from others offers unparalleled opportunities to strengthen existing business relationships, deepen client loyalties, and generate additional profits at reduced risk. All too often, we fail to capitalize on opportunities for additional business not because the work is unavailable or we don't want it, but because we don't know how to comfortably ask for it. The solution—as is so often the case—is solid preparation.

New business from existing clients comes in three distinct ways. The lesson identifies those three forms, discusses the common reasons we fail to ask for more business, outlines a simple four-step process for requesting additional work, and offers sample dialogue for actually making the request.

MEETING WITH PROSPECTIVE CLIENTS

New clients are the lifeblood of every professional services firm, bringing with them new opportunities for service development, improved utilization, increased revenues, and professional growth. A highly successful, compelling first meeting with a prospective client quickly puts your firm in a position of advantage over others the client may be considering. Such a meeting will not occur by chance; instead, it will be the product of conscious and thorough preparation.

The battle for the hearts and minds of new clients can be fierce, and successfully differentiating your firm from others seeking the prospect's business is a critical factor in winning that contest. This lesson focuses on the meeting preparation process and discusses how to learn about each prospect, the things you need to understand before the meeting, the things you need to know about the meeting, and how to make a good impression.

ACCEPTING THE RIGHT CLIENTS

New clients represent new opportunities for success. Beyond the obvious—generating additional income—new clients may bring a host of other exciting possibilities: access to a fresh source of referrals, business relationships, and contacts, the chance to serve a new industry or strengthen our position in an existing one, or the opportunity to develop a new niche service, to name just a few. But with the possibilities also come risks. Accepting the right clients—knowing which ones to accept and which to gently but firmly steer in another direction—can minimize our risk and save us from serious problems and potential embarrassment down the road. Thoughtful preparation, including an understanding of key principles and steps, will help us turn opportunity into success as we determine which new clients to accept.

The key to accepting the right clients lies in having a solid process in place for screening prospects and determining who is and who is not going to become a new firm client. Following a discussion of why we sometimes accept the wrong clients and how those clients negatively impact us, this lesson recommends and explains five steps for firms to follow in developing a new client acceptance process.

DIFFERENTIATING YOUR FIRM IN THE MARKETPLACE

We work in an era of intense competition, rapid change, and ever-increasing choices for those in need of vital accounting and business consulting services. A constantly expanding, world-wide marketplace now puts many of our core traditional services within easy reach—sometimes just a few mouse clicks—of both personal and corporate clients, and frequently at lower cost than we can provide those same services. Within this highly competitive environment, firms must sometimes make difficult and far-reaching decisions about how to set themselves apart from their competitors. Those decisions become much easier to make with a clear understanding of the key principles and methods of differentiation.

As accounting firms consider what to do to be viewed as unique in their marketplaces, a number of creative ideas and innovative strategies will likely be generated and discussed. This lesson stresses the importance of being proactive in defining your firm, discusses the five primary approaches to differentiation, and offers important tips for leaders to follow as they answer the question, “What do we want our firm to be famous for?”

BUILDING A STRONG REFERRAL NETWORK

In a day of declining client loyalty and expanding options for those who need our services, building a strong referral network is essential to the financial stability and long-term success of both professional services firms and the individuals who work there. Unfortunately, the practice of developing a solid network of referral sources seems to have become a lost art in many accounting firms. Building a network of individuals so confident of your abilities that they are willing to enthusiastically recommend you to others is not especially difficult. With careful preparation, any firm member can assemble a reliable network of individuals eager to pass on leads for new business.

Building a strong referral network requires a sincere interest in the success of others, conscious planning, consistent communication, and ongoing attention. This lesson explains five key principles for building a strong referral network and offers a number of valuable tips to help ensure success in this important area of business development.

CREATING WINNING PROPOSALS

The continued decline in client loyalty and the expanding consumer marketplace have brought a multitude of challenges to accounting firms. But with those challenges have also come opportunities, as ever-increasing numbers of businesses have opened the door to change by ending long-term professional relationships and issuing requests for proposals. Unfortunately, most firms have not significantly changed the look and feel of their proposals for many years and even fewer have taken the time to improve their processes for responding to proposal requests. Developing and following a process that ensures your firm’s proposal will receive the consideration it deserves is not particularly difficult, but it does require careful thought, creativity, a commitment to change, and the ability to see your proposal through the eyes of its intended recipients.

Instead of spending huge amounts of time and energy trying to get in front of more prospects, firms need to focus on becoming ever-better at what sets them apart from their competitors and at how those differences are communicated to potential clients. This lesson

teaches ten vital keys firms need to understand and apply to create winning proposals and turn every opportunity to propose—including those that don't produce new work—into an opportunity to learn and build for the future.

BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY INTO BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

Every firm has its rainmakers, the people who just seem to have a knack for marketing and selling the firm's services and who account for the majority of new work that comes in the door each year. Unfortunately, an entire generation of rainmakers is getting ready to retire, and many partner groups are anxiously scanning the horizon and wondering who is going to bring in the new business once these individuals are gone. While it's true that some individuals do have a special talent for business development, marketing the firm's services is an activity in which every employee needs to be an active participant. And with a solid understanding of important principles, key steps, and how to build accountability into the process, it's also an activity in which every participant can experience success and make a meaningful contribution.

In many firms, business development receives considerable attention but garners little in the way of solid results. This lesson explains four vital business development principles leaders must understand, and teaches a simple process for focusing effort and ensuring accountability.

MAKING A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

Scientific evidence suggests that the opportunity to make a positive first impression is fleeting at best, with many people forming opinions within the first three to fifteen seconds of exposure to another individual. Even more daunting is the realization that changing a first impression can be very difficult. In the business world, opportunities to make a good first impression come on almost a daily basis, whether it's with a potential client or referral source, a community leader, or the person at the corner sandwich shop. Making an impression—either good or bad—on a new acquaintance will occur no matter what we do. With a solid understanding of enduring principles and vital keys, we can do much to ensure that the first impression others form of us is positive and provides a strong foundation for building a lasting business relationship.

Making a good first impression creates many opportunities. This lesson discusses the four vital principles that must be understood by those who want to improve the first impression they leave and teaches the five keys to success in accomplishing that important task.

CROSS-SELLING FIRM SERVICES: FINDING COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTIONS TO CLIENT NEEDS

Nearly every accounting firm has a goal to increase the range of services provided to existing valued clients. Most agree that it's easier to develop new business with someone already familiar with the firm than it is to go out and find a new client. Many believe that cross-selling firm services ought to be easy, but few firms are successful in doing it on any kind of consistent basis. Successfully marketing additional services to current clients requires firms to overcome significant internal obstacles. More importantly, it requires a fundamental shift in thinking, a change in focus from "How will the firm gain from this?" to "What do our clients

really need that we can help them with?” With this change in thinking and a clear understanding of other vital principles, firms can dramatically increase the effectiveness of their cross-selling efforts.

SERVING ON COMMUNITY BOARDS

A strong commitment to community service has long been an important part of the culture of many firms. Involvement in local organizations helps build better communities and sends a powerful message about the firm’s interest in the clients who work and live in those communities. The benefits of such involvement are significant and include positive exposure for the firm and opportunities for networking, development of referral sources, and personal growth for firm members. Serving successfully on community governing bodies, and thereby both giving and gaining the most from the experience, is an acquired skill. With a clear understanding of the vital keys to success and sound advice from those who are experienced in community service, firm members can serve confidently and competently on local boards and more fully enjoy the rewards that come from their efforts.

Meaningful community service helps us to rethink, refocus and be sure we’re putting first things first. This lesson discusses the various benefits of community involvement, explains six vital keys for successfully serving on a local organization’s board of directors, and offers important cautions about the potential pitfalls of community service.

RESPONDING TO OBJECTIONS ABOUT HIGH FEES

Client concerns about high fees are a fact of life in our profession. Sometimes those concerns are expressed very directly, even angrily. At other times, uneasiness over fees may be just below the surface of a question, comment, or action. There may be little that can be done to prevent clients from occasionally feeling such anxiety; there is, however, much we can do to be ready to respond to their objections.

The focus of this lesson is not if, when, or where a discussion about high fees is going to take place, but how we should respond when it does happen. The lesson discusses five reasons that clients question fees, explains what we shouldn't do when this occurs, and provides four key principles to guide us in responding to objections about fees.

MAKING CLIENT MEETINGS MORE VALUABLE

Client meetings are essential to what we do, providing significant opportunities to convey vital information, strengthen relationships, and generate new work. They are also processes—repeatable business events—and as such, there is probably considerable room for improvement in how we handle these important events. The key to effective meetings is preparation—what we do to prepare ourselves and how we prepare our clients for each meeting.

In this age of diminishing client loyalty, we should view every client meeting as an opportunity to strengthen an important business relationship. This lesson lists the top ten reasons client meetings fail, discusses a six step process for making meetings more effective, and identifies nine keys for conducting successful meetings.

IMPROVING CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Few would dispute that loyal clients are the lifeblood of every professional services firm. They represent established relationships of trust, opportunities for additional business at reduced cost and minimal risk, referral opportunities, and the security and convenience of familiar data and circumstances. When good clients walk out our door, all of these advantages—as well as the lost income—pass under the exit sign with them. Retaining valued clients is not particularly difficult; it does, however require an understanding of several key principles, a proactive attitude, and a willingness as Hubbard said, to “do good work today” in preparation for tomorrow.

We work in an age of decreasing client loyalty, making it imperative that all employees accept personal responsibility and have a clear understanding of how to improve relationships with the clients they serve. This lesson offers important insights on client relationships, provides eight vital keys to improving those relationships, and explains how to apply each key.

KEEPING CLIENTS INFORMED OF YOUR PROGRESS

As a profession we have a well-deserved reputation for getting the job done—for taking on difficult tasks, putting our heads down, and producing great results—often to the delight and nearly always to the satisfaction of our clients. Because the work is frequently complex and demanding, it's easy for us to become so absorbed by what we're doing that we fail to

communicate well. As a result, we neglect to keep those whom we serve informed of our progress. When the invoice is the first real communication the client has received since signing the engagement letter, one of our greatest strengths—the ability to stay focused and produce results—has become a liability. The solution is not difficult: a raised awareness of the importance of regular, clear communication, especially during an engagement, and an understanding of key principles and essential tasks for keeping clients informed of our progress.

Keeping clients informed of our progress during the course of an engagement avoids a host of potential difficulties and yields impressive dividends in the client relationship. This lesson identifies the costs and most common reasons for poor communication and teaches important principles of client communication. The advantages of providing regular progress reports as well as the key elements in such reports are discussed in depth.

SETTING YOUR FIRM APART WITH QUALITY SERVICE

Ask any ten firms what distinguishes them from their competition and most, if not all, will quickly answer, “We take care of our clients and give great service.” Careful analysis of those same ten firms would likely reveal that many of them do, in fact, take very good care of their clients and provide them with highly skilled service. Unfortunately, if most firms believe they’re already providing great service—and many truly are serving their clients well—it becomes nearly impossible to hold on to “We take care of our clients and give great service” as something that differentiates firms from one another. Reason would argue that there is a solution to this dilemma, and there is.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of all great firms is their ability to differentiate themselves from their competitors. This lesson reviews the primary methods of differentiation, discusses the special challenges of the “better” approach, and carefully explains six keys to setting your firm apart with quality service.

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING CLIENT SERVICE STANDARDS

In today’s challenging business climate, creating a sustainable competitive advantage that sets our firm apart from others in the marketplace is absolutely essential. Accounting firms can choose from a number of different tools and strategies to create that competitive edge. Client service standards, clear statements of acceptable levels of performance and behavior for all owners and employees, are one of the most powerful tools available to firms as they seek to differentiate themselves and gain the accompanying advantage. Developing and implementing client service standards is not particularly complicated, but successfully accomplishing this important task does require a clear understanding of important principles and key steps.

Unfortunately, many firms lack clear standards that tell employees and owners what is expected of them in their interactions with clients. After discussing vital principles that should guide the creation of client service standards, this lesson provides a simple six-step process for developing and implementing such standards.

DEVELOPING LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

Developing lasting relationships with clients brings many benefits, including better working relations, less fee resistance, additional work, and more referrals. Because of this, nearly every firm genuinely desires to build quality relationships with those it serves, but many struggle to achieve this goal. The obstacles that must be overcome in developing meaningful long term relationships are formidable: insufficient time, poor skills, lack of interest, negative attitudes, overemphasis on “selling” additional services, etc. However, with a commitment to change, a willingness to exert the required effort, and an understanding of vital principles, firms can transform many client relationships from a “today” focus that sees only the current interaction to a “tomorrow and beyond” perspective that emphasizes building the relationship for many years to come.

With the imminent retirement of an entire generation of firm leaders, the future of many client relationships may soon be at risk. After first listing the considerable benefits of developing enduring relationships, this lesson examines the common barriers firms face in developing such relationships. Six vital principles firm members must understand and know how to apply are also carefully explained.

IMPROVING YOUR BILLING PRACTICES

It’s no secret that many otherwise excellent firms experience significant struggles with their billing practices, as evidenced by large amounts of potentially unbillable time marooned in WIP and excessive amounts of rapidly aging A/R continually on the verge of becoming expensive write-offs. Seldom a popular topic of discussion at managers’ meetings or shareholder retreats, many among us bristle at the suggestion that change might be needed in how we interact with clients regarding payment for services. And yet, change is necessary if our firms are to prosper and move confidently forward into the future. With a solid understanding of vital principles and proven keys and steps, the prospect of positive change—both individually and as a firm—quickly becomes far less daunting.

Sound billing practices are a repeatable business process, and as such, they can continually be improved. This lesson teaches the essential principles firm members must understand and explains the vital keys that must be followed to improve billing practices.

DEVELOPING C-LEVEL CLIENTS INTO A-LEVEL CLIENTS

Most leaders know that few things will do more to build the firm, sustain high morale, and strengthen firm culture than serving the right clients. They also intuitively understand that serving the wrong clients will, in the long run, only hurt the firm. Many firms search for A-level clients without ever taking the time to clearly define what “A-level” means, and then express surprise when client performance doesn’t seem to match expectations. Others apparently subscribe to a “once a C-level, always a C-level” mindset, denying to their clients the same right to continuous improvement that they hold so dear for the firm. Just as most firms can, with proper effort, grow and get better, so also can many C-level clients develop into A-levels. With a clear articulation of A-level characteristics, a solid understanding of essential principles, and a proven process, many firms need look no further than their current client list to find their next A-level client.

The more C- and D-level clients the firm serves, the less capacity it has to serve A-level clients and provide A-level service. This lesson identifies the key characteristics of A-level clients, discusses six principles that must be understood in helping C-level clients get better, and describes a simple five-step process for facilitating that improvement.

MAKING FIRM MEETINGS MORE PRODUCTIVE

Meetings—occasions when at least two employees come together, focusing their attention on one or more firm issues—are a fact of life in business. Done well, they offer unique opportunities to reinforce firm culture and core values, strengthen relationships, provide valuable training and skills conditioning, and really focus on those things that set you apart as a firm. Productive meetings don't happen by chance or good fortune, nor do they necessarily demand the expertise or expense of outside consultants. What they do require is thoughtful planning and careful preparation.

Ineffective, time-wasting meetings plague many firms. After suggesting four measuring rods for gauging a meeting's effectiveness and discussing the factors that frequently keep meetings from being successful, this lesson offers a simple nine-step process for ensuring that your firm's meetings are productive and meaningful.

THE POWER OF EXAMPLE

The power of a positive example is impossible to estimate. When asked to list the factors that have contributed most to their success, many leaders quickly point to one or two individuals—frequently encountered early in their careers—who shaped their views, taught them great principles, or pointed them in important directions. Often, the power of the examples set by these mentors is cited as their greatest influence, easily eclipsing any profound words spoken, difficult decisions made, or dramatic actions taken. The ability to influence another person in such a significant way doesn't occur by chance. It is the product of conscious decisions and thoughtful preparation.

Employees learn more about your firm's core values, expectations, performance standards, unwritten rules, culture, and vision from the examples set by firm leaders than from any other source. The lesson offers insightful observations on the power of example, identifies the benefits that come from aggressively harnessing its power to teach, and offers examples of settings where that power might most effectively be utilized.

MANAGING AND REDUCING PAST DUE RECEIVABLES

For most of us, performing challenging work for a valued client holds much greater appeal than billing and collecting for that work when the engagement is over or the task has been completed. Anxiety over how much to charge for problems encountered while performing the work, the impact of time-consuming surprises, and who is responsible for work that took longer than anticipated all fuel legitimate concerns about damaging an important client relationship with a larger than anticipated invoice or overly aggressive collection efforts. Many of these fears are unfounded, however, and with “unspectacular preparation”—a solid understanding of key principles and simple steps—past due receivables can be effectively managed and client relationships strengthened in the process.

Collecting on unpaid invoices is a very necessary part of what we do. This lesson shares valuable insights on this important task, examines why clients fail to pay on time, and discusses the key principles that must be a part of firm culture before the problem can be solved. In addition, the lesson recommends five steps for firms to follow in managing and reducing their past due receivables.

RETAINING YOUR BEST AND BRIGHTEST EMPLOYEES

If accounting firm survey results are any indication, retaining our best employees surely qualifies as a major accomplishment, if not the “spectacular achievement” referred to by Roger Staubach. When asked to name the issues of greatest concern to them, firm leaders have in recent years consistently listed retention of quality employees as one of the top two or three things keeping them awake at night. That holding on to the best among us should rank so highly on the list of things managing partners, HR directors, and other key leaders worry about should come as no surprise to anyone. Those who are doing the work day in and day out, preparing tax returns, producing audit reports, and skillfully advising clients are quite literally both the present and the future of the firm. Creating a work environment that fosters firm loyalty, encourages the best and the brightest to remain, and ensures a healthy today and a bright tomorrow is neither magical nor terribly difficult; it requires only the “unspectacular preparation” that NFL great Staubach declared always precedes “spectacular achievements.”

Few firms devote the same resources to retaining quality employees that they do to other similarly important endeavors. After offering important insights on retention and discussing both the obvious and seldom seen costs of losing a valued employee, this lesson presents seven vital keys that will help you retain your best and brightest.

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

A culture of accountability is characterized by the absence of casualness and by employees who understand what commitment means and consistently fulfill assignments on time and to the best of their abilities. In our “pass the buck” society that all too often allows individuals and corporations to evade responsibility, firms seeking to create a culture of accountability face some daunting challenges. Consequently, few have established formal systems of accountability. Most firms still do not have a process in place that every employee understands and can follow and that ensures individuals will be held accountable for doing what they said they would do. Creating a culture of accountability is something any quality firm can do, but it requires focused effort, an understanding of key principles, and a commitment to change old attitudes, habits, and ways.

A strong culture of accountability is a key element in the success of every professional services firm. After first identifying the characteristics of such a culture and then the symptoms of poor accountability, this lesson offers six keys to developing a culture of accountability. A two-pronged approach for firms to follow as they seek to establish such a culture is also carefully explained.

BUILDING FIRM UNITY

Building unity is one of the most important responsibilities of firm leaders. The power of a firm united by a common vision, a spirit of teamwork, and an atmosphere of mutual respect, and focused on providing excellent service in every client interaction simply cannot be measured. Developing unity at all levels and instilling a “What’s in the firm’s best interests?” attitude in every employee is a challenging but accomplishable task that pays great dividends. With a clear understanding of the principal causes of lack of unity, the barriers faced by those

seeking to develop a unified firm, and the vital keys necessary to building firm unity, skilled leaders can achieve this important goal.

The benefits of building firm unity are significant. This lesson reviews those benefits, identifies the common symptoms and causes of disunity and barriers to building unity, and discusses the risks of ignoring a lack of firm unity. The lesson also carefully explains the six vital keys to building firm unity.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION THROUGHOUT YOUR FIRM

We live in an age of proliferating information and constant communication. On any given day, more information is generated than one person could possibly hope to understand in a lifetime. Individually and as organizations, we are at times nearly engulfed in a vast ocean of messages. Within our firms, we rely on effective communication to comply with government regulations, maintain technical competence, present our message to prospects, preserve important client relationships, bring the right people to our doors as new hires, deliver services, and perform many other vital, external functions. Unfortunately, our focus on external communication all too often blinds us to the critical need for consistent, meaningful, and timely communication within our own walls. Communicating perfectly at all times and in all circumstances is probably not attainable, but with a solid understanding of key principles and important steps to be followed, every firm can—and must—do better in this crucial leadership function.

Everything leaders do, say, or write communicates important messages to others and has the potential to dramatically affect the success of the firm. After listing some common symptoms of poor communication and identifying the “seven deadly sins” and other communication pitfalls, this lesson offers key principles and a six step process to guide firm leaders in improving this vital leadership function.

DEALING WITH UNDERPERFORMING EMPLOYEES

Underperforming employees exist in virtually every organization. The causes of underperformance are many and include lack of motivation, friction with other workers or leaders, inadequate preparation, poor work habits or attitudes, and serious personal issues. Underperformance manifests itself in a variety of different ways: failure to meet production goals, missed deadlines, poor team participation, technical errors, etc. Despite the wide range of both causes and types of lackluster performance, there seems always to be one common denominator when it comes to underperformance in our profession: we don't deal with it very well. Helping an underperformer improve may not be something we look forward to, but doing it is not particularly difficult. It does, however, require personal courage and commitment, careful preparation, and a sound understanding of key principles and important steps.

Underperformance is contagious, and if we turn our back on it and do nothing, it will likely spread. This lesson defines underperformance, explores its causes, discusses common examples of underperformance, and identifies the risks of ignoring sub-standard performance. Vital principles for dealing with underperformance are discussed and a five step process for assisting individuals to improve their performance is carefully explained.

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A PARTNER COMMITMENT STATEMENT

Partner performance is one of the most frequently discussed (and sometimes warmly debated) topics at professional conferences, at annual shareholders' meetings, and around the office water cooler. Unfortunately, many firms lack written ground rules or clear performance standards for owners. Without such rules and standards, objectively evaluating partner performance and behavior is difficult at best, and making meaningful course corrections is almost impossible. A commitment statement formulated, agreed-upon, and enforced by the owner group is an important first step in establishing partner performance standards.

A carefully developed and properly implemented partner commitment statement builds unity within the owner group, strengthens firm culture, and communicates a powerful message to the entire firm. This lesson presents key questions that should drive the creation of such a statement and teaches a step-by-step development and implementation process.

FIRING D-LEVEL CLIENTS

Like firing a poorly-performing employee, getting rid of bad clients is seldom something we look forward to doing. And yet, the truth is that few things will do more to help build a profitable accounting practice than choosing and retaining the right clients. Continually searching for and then working hard to keep the best—the A-level clients—means that we must also be willing to periodically identify and then cull the worst clients. Few firms have a solid process in place for screening and selecting new clients, and even fewer know how (or are willing) to regularly remove from their client lists those who really would be happier and better served elsewhere. Properly firing D-level clients is not especially difficult, but it does require an understanding of key principles and important steps.

Retaining D-level clients creates tremendous challenges for those who serve them and for the entire firm. This lesson identifies the reasons we hang on to bad clients, discusses the typical characteristics of D-levels, and outlines a clear, step-by-step process for regularly culling client lists.

RESOLVING WORK/LIFE BALANCE ISSUES

We live in challenging times. Economic dislocations, the fears engendered by the events of September 11 and the ongoing war on terror, the growing prominence of Gen-Xers in the workplace—as well as other factors—have caused many employees to reexamine their priorities and decide important questions far differently today than they would have a few short years ago. The impact of this cultural phenomenon on professional services firms has been significant. As employees have sought to re-define the balance between work and the rest of their lives, firm leaders have responded in a wide variety of ways, and often with mixed results. Helping employees resolve work/life balance issues requires leaders to understand key principles, have a clear sense of the firm's approach to this important issue, and proactively take steps that reflect the firm's stance.

Work/life balance consistently ranks as one of the leading reasons professionals leave public accounting. After teaching key principles, this lesson identifies danger signals leaders need to watch for and offers ten solid ideas for resolving work/life issues.

DEVELOPING A GREAT ORIENTATION PROGRAM

Profound changes are occurring in the employment marketplace. Recruitment and retention of quality employees, both already hot issues for many firms, will become hotter still as the Baby Boomers move into retirement in the coming years. In the scramble to find and keep the best people, many firms are employing ever-more-creative and expensive means to accomplish their ends. Employee orientation programs have tremendous potential to teach core values, introduce the new employee to the firm's unique culture, and develop strong feelings of loyalty. To realize that potential, however, firms must have both a clear understanding of key principles and a solid process for orienting new employees.

Employee orientation occurs in every organization, either by design or default. This lesson discusses four key principles of great orientation programs, teaches five vital steps firms need to follow to improve their programs, and offers many useful hints and tips for taking your program to a new level of excellence.

MOVING PEOPLE AWAY FROM COMPLACENCY

Like weeds in a garden, complacency comes in all shapes and sizes and may appear nearly anywhere within the firm. The symptoms may seem minor—slow responses to email messages, inability to accomplish basic tasks in a timely way—or feel more serious, such as missed charge hour budgets or out of control AR & WIP agings. The risks to the firm of ignoring obvious symptoms and simply hoping problems will go away on their own are enormous. Eliminating complacency begins with a proactive mindset and an awareness of what causes complacency and the obstacles that must be overcome in removing it. Then, with an understanding of key principles and vital steps, firm leaders can move people onto a path that will provide enhanced job satisfaction, higher productivity, and greater success.

Left unchecked, complacency can spread rapidly and cause considerable damage. This lesson first identifies the key characteristics and symptoms of complacency. The barriers to and benefits of removing it are then discussed, along with key principles and a proven process firms can follow to get rid of complacency.

CONTINUOUS SELF IMPROVEMENT

Self improvement is a multi-billion dollar industry in today's world. Highly sophisticated advertising tells us very convincingly that financial security, a beautiful complexion, and inner peace are just a video, a cream-filled jar, or a paperback book away. Why do these and other similar products enjoy such wide popularity? Because they appeal to the desire deep within most of us to improve, to get better. Properly directed, that desire has enormous potential to change our lives.

If we are no better tomorrow than we were today, our clients will soon look elsewhere to have their needs met. The lesson carefully explains a proven, four step process for setting and accomplishing improvement goals, discusses how to overcome common obstacles to self improvement, and emphasizes the importance of taking full responsibility for the three things we alone can control.

BECOMING SELF ACCOUNTABLE

If newspaper headlines are any indication, accountability is prominent in the minds of many people today. From politics to the entertainment world to business, issues of personal responsibility seem to loom large on just about everyone's radar screen. For most firms, accountability is comparatively simple and really comes down to this one important question: "When an assignment is given, what assurance is there that it will be completed, and that it will be done properly and within the agreed-upon time frame?" The key to obtaining that assurance is self accountability.

Self accountability is crucial to the success of your firm and to the personal success of every employee. After first defining what it really means and then offering observations on accountability, the lesson teaches four key principles of self accountability and provides a simple process any person can use to create a self accountability action plan.

KEEPING FOCUSED IN SPITE OF INTERRUPTIONS

Interruptions are a fact of life in today's fast-paced business world. Whether it's the phone ringing, email messages chiming their way in, a fax arriving, or someone knocking at our door, most busy professionals are interrupted many times each day. These frequent interruptions interfere with our thought processes, hamper our problem-solving skills, impede our creativity, and get in the way of countless other important things we do. Although we cannot, in many cases, prevent interruptions from arriving at our doorstep, we can change how we respond to them. The key to staying focused in spite of inevitable interruptions lies in solid preparation—an understanding of key principles and a willingness to change our behavior.

It's easy to buy in to myths that make it difficult for us to respond to the many interruptions that come our way each day. This lesson identifies and dispels several of those myths, provides three simple keys to dealing with frequent interruptions, and offers thirteen proven, down-to-earth tips for eliminating or controlling interruptions.

IMPROVING YOUR PRESENTATION SKILLS

Making a group presentation—whether to convey important information, persuade a client’s leadership team to accept a new service, advocate for a change in firm policy or direction, or for some other important purpose—is something virtually all employees will be required to do at some time (or perhaps many times) during their careers. While a few among us seem to have been born with radio-quality voices, microphones attached to their lapels and dynamic, fifty-slide PowerPoint presentations tucked away in their back pockets, it is crucial to remember that speaking effectively before a group is a learned skill that nearly all employees can acquire without superhuman effort or a year’s coursework at a major university. Armed with commitment, an understanding of key principles, and the collective wisdom and experience of those who have stood before hundreds and survived, even the most stage-shy person can become a competent presenter. With similar determination and effort, those with greater native ability can become truly expert.

Success in today’s highly competitive business world will require almost all employees to become capable presenters. This lesson discusses six important keys to effective presentations, offers ten tips for improving your presentations, and provides helpful advice on preparing PowerPoint slides.

SETTING AND ACCOMPLISHING MEANINGFUL GOALS

Goal setting is hardly a revolutionary concept. Many people and most firms routinely set goals and then work on tasks they believe will help them achieve their goals. Unfortunately, the ease of setting goals all too often collides with the reality of the organization and work required to accomplish them. The usual byproducts of that encounter are frustration for individuals, teams, and the firm, and disenchantment with the very idea of setting goals. The solution is a goal setting process that holds us accountable for the goals we’ve set and takes a “leave nothing to chance” approach to both setting and accomplishing goals—all of which is nothing more than the “unspectacular preparation” referred to by Roger Staubach.

Few would dispute the strong relationship between achieving meaningful goals and experiencing career success. After discussing the issue of goal periods and the importance of setting S M A R T goals, this lesson offers a proven five-step process for setting and accomplishing goals. Key principles of accountability are also discussed, along with the individual commitment required to achieve goals.

DELEGATING EFFECTIVELY

Few among us start the morning with the thought, “I hope something comes along to occupy my time today.” In truth, many professionals feel that the demands on their time and energy regularly outstrip available resources, and often by a considerable margin. Although the normal, uneven flow of engagements and assignments inevitably produces both peaks and valleys in our workloads, the reality is that all too often we help create those peaks by failing to properly delegate work to others. Delegating effectively is not particularly difficult. It does, however, require us to confront the reasons we don’t delegate and then implement key steps that result in effective delegation.

More effective delegation provides important benefits to busy professionals, those receiving assignments, clients, and the firm. After reviewing the common excuses we give for not delegating, the real reasons we fail to delegate, and the significant benefits of delegation, this lesson teaches a simple, six-step process that ensures effective delegation. Important delegation “dos and don’ts” are also discussed.

ACCEPTING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Accepting constructive feedback from coaches, mentors, leaders, and others who have a sincere interest in our success is a very necessary part of continuous improvement. Appropriately given, constructive feedback helps us understand how we are perceived by others, provides opportunities for personal and professional growth, enhances our career prospects, and strengthens the firm. Taking constructive feedback from others requires considerable confidence in both the perceptions and intentions of those providing the feedback, a genuine desire to change, learn, and get better, and a willingness to acknowledge that we can and should improve. Only when these elements are in place can we realize the full benefit of what others can tell us about ourselves.

Listening to someone recite our shortcomings is, for most of us, about as attractive as major surgery without anesthesia. After first differentiating constructive feedback from criticism, this lesson discusses the value of feedback, the barriers we sometimes raise that make it difficult for others to help us, and the things we can do to assist those trying to give us constructive feedback. Five key principles for accepting constructing feedback are then carefully explained.

IMPROVING YOUR LISTENING SKILLS

In today’s fast-paced business world, we spend much of our time listening. Firm leaders communicate their vision of the future, give direction, and help us understand how we can improve. Peers and co-workers share important information about current projects, perplexing challenges, and proud accomplishments. Clients send valuable messages about our performance on the latest engagement, how they feel about the staff who served them, and what the future holds for their businesses. Responding effectively to the daily flood of messages requires excellent listening skills, and yet few among us ever make a conscious effort to improve those skills. Becoming a great listener is not especially difficult, but it does require commitment, practice, an understanding of vital principles and a willingness to implement important keys to effective listening.

The impact of poor listening skills, both in our personal lives and in business, can be enormous. This lesson explores the barriers to good listening, explains the five vital principles of effective listening, and teaches important keys to developing better listening skills.

IMPROVING YOUR WRITING SKILLS

As a profession, we have a well-deserved reputation for technical expertise. We “crunch the numbers” with relative ease, providing expert advice to our clients as they make important financial decisions. Vital as those skills are in meeting increasingly sophisticated client needs, strong technical skills alone cannot guarantee success in today’s accounting world. We must also be able to effectively communicate difficult concepts, unexpected or even unwanted

messages, challenging choices, etc.—and frequently that communication has to be in writing. While we don't need the skills of an Ernest Hemingway to communicate effectively with those we serve, an understanding of a few basic rules of grammar and punctuation, some key principles of business writing, and how to avoid common writing errors will greatly improve the letters and other documents we send to our clients.

Improving our business writing skills enhances our professional image and credibility, reduces misunderstandings with others, and aids in our business development efforts. This lesson teaches the keys to becoming a better writer and offers a five-step approach to producing better business letters and emails.

DEALING SUCCESSFULLY WITH WORKPLACE STRESS

As accountants, we don't need to look very far to find potential sources of stress in what we do. The long hours of busy season, the unrelenting pressure of billable hours, the need to remain within budget while still giving quality service, the changes that accompany partner retirements, and countless other factors all have the potential to exact a heavy toll on both our personal and professional lives. Dealing successfully with workplace stress entails much more than adopting the latest fad cure-all. To respond effectively to stress, we need to understand both its causes and effects, know how to recognize it in ourselves and in others, possess a solid understanding of vital stress management principles, and have an array of tools and techniques at the ready whenever we need to use them.

We may not always be able to eliminate workplace pressures, but we can control how we respond to them. After first discussing the positive impacts of such pressures and then identifying ways stress typically manifests itself, this lesson explains in detail a five step process for better managing stress.

REMEMBERING PEOPLE'S NAMES

Recalling and correctly pronouncing the names of clients, prospects, referral sources and other business acquaintances is critical to the success of every professional. Calling others by name sends a powerful message of respect, genuine interest, and appreciation for those around us. While readily acknowledging its importance, many in our profession are also quick to admit that remembering names is not one of their personal strengths. Although it may be true that some have a special gift in this area, recalling names and faces is, in fact, an acquired skill for most people. And like many other skills, a clear understanding of enduring principles, a commitment to follow proven processes, and a willingness to change old behaviors and attitudes will produce significant results.

Strong people skills have a huge impact on the success of our business relationships. This lesson discusses the three vital principles that must be understood to remember people's names and teaches a five-step process for mastering the required skills. In addition, the lesson offers helpful tips for gracefully getting through the inevitable occasions when a name cannot be recalled.

FINISHING WHAT YOU START

Our work lives are complex, with multiple demands on our resources, high expectations from those we serve, challenging legal requirements that must be met, and a host of other factors in place that ensure ample daily challenges. In such an environment, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and for performance to decline. Deadlines may get missed and important tasks may be left undone. Client service may suffer, and others may be forced to remind us of commitments we've made but not honored. The root of all these difficulties may be surprisingly simple: failing to finish what we've started. However, just as failing to finish is a learned behavior, so also is successfully completing assigned tasks a skill anyone can learn to do. All that's required is solid commitment and a clear understanding of timeless principles and key steps.

Achieving excellence is the aim of every professional, and great execution is essential to reaching that goal. This lesson describes the symptoms of poor execution, identifies potential barriers to success, and teaches the key principles that must be understood to improve execution. A proven five-step process for improving execution is presented and carefully explained.

HANDLING IRRITATIONS EFFECTIVELY

The very nature of our work—frequent interactions with clients and colleagues, tight deadlines, the pressure of billable hours, etc.—almost ensures that patience and tolerance will sometimes be in too-short supply and give rise to irritation. The tendency among many is to always assume that “the problem” (not to mention “the solution”) belongs to someone else: if only Mary would answer emails more quickly, if only my charge hour budget wasn't so high, if only John would follow through on assignments, if only.... But the solution doesn't reside in others changing their behavior—it belongs to us. It's up to us to re-shape our attitudes and change our actions, and with a clear understanding of correct principles and key actions, that daunting task can quickly feel very accomplishable.

How we handle life's inevitable irritations is, in many ways, a measure of who we are. After exploring why we often avoid dealing with annoying behavior, this lesson teaches the four vital principles that should be the foundation for any response we make. The choice of learning to live with someone else's irritating actions is discussed, along with steps to follow in meeting with another individual to discuss his/her behavior.

MAKING THE MOST OF INVESTMENT TIME

Not surprisingly, billable time has reigned supreme in nearly every accounting firm since the invention of the abacus. In his book *True Professionalism* David Maister observes, “There exists, even among the best professionals and professional firms, a perverse belief that only billable time...really counts. Anything non-billable is viewed as either worthless or not as valuable as ‘real’ work.” Maister further argues that the time has come to replace the traditional billable and nonbillable classifications with “income time” (serving clients), “investment time” (creating the future), and “individual time” (everything else). Although some have given lip service to the importance of investment time, the reality is that income

generating activity still trumps everything else in most firms and the concept of using nonbillable time to create the future isn't really taken seriously. The good news is that any firm can embrace investment time and reap the benefits of doing so without reducing billable hours, either in number or importance. Successfully doing so requires firm leaders to make a major paradigm shift and firm members to develop the discipline necessary to turn unstructured nonbillable time into investment time that produces concrete results.

Making the most of nonbillable time positions each of us to literally create our own future. After explaining several key principles, this lesson describes a simple four-step process for getting maximum benefit from investment time.

GIVING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Giving constructive feedback to another employee is one of the most valuable things a leader, coach, or mentor can do. Properly given, feedback on job performance opens doors to professional and personal growth, builds the relationship between the person receiving the feedback and the individual giving it, and ultimately strengthens the firm. Providing meaningful feedback to a fellow employee—and doing it well—requires thoughtful planning and preparation.

If praise is the only thing others ever hear from us, the opportunity to get better and turn weaknesses into strengths will be lost. After first differentiating criticism from constructive feedback, this lesson offers eight rules for giving feedback, warns of potential pitfalls, and identifies when and how feedback should be given as well as who should give it.

INVITING PEOPLE TO SERVE ON TEAMS

Effective teamwork is vital to the success of every firm. Numerous firms recognize the importance of teamwork and list it as one of their core values. Teamwork is also a process—a repeatable event that we can learn to do better—and few things are more important to that process than how we invite people to serve on teams. Done well, the invitation to be part of a team can dramatically increase the likelihood that the team will accomplish its appointed mission.

The lesson lists common mistakes made when asking someone to serve on a team, identifies a six step process for extending invitations to serve, explains four key principles of effective teamwork, and discusses the potential impact each member has on the success of the team.

GIVING MEANINGFUL PRAISE

Feeling valued and appreciated is one of our most basic human needs. Giving meaningful praise helps to fulfill that important need and is one of the most powerful tools leaders can use to encourage and reward performance. It's also one of the least expensive motivators available; all it costs is a little time and some honest attention to what is going on around us. The simplicity of giving praise is at once its finest asset and greatest challenge; more often than not, it's done at a mediocre level, leaving both the giver and the recipient feeling less than satisfied. Like so many things we do in the business world, a clear understanding of key principles and a few minutes of thoughtful preparation may well spell the difference between the good and the great in praising the work of others.

But how do you do it—how do you move from mediocre to excellent in praising the work of others? And how do you do it in a way that's comfortable for both the praise giver and the recipient? After discussing the many ways both individuals and firms benefit from praise, the lesson provides six crucial keys to giving meaningful praise and offers nine valuable tips to help you become a true expert.

COACHING EMPLOYEES TO MANAGE THEIR TIME

Author/consultant Jim Clemmer tells the story of a frantic manager bursting into a travel agency. "Get me an airplane ticket!" he shouts. "Where do you want to go?" replies the

helpful travel agent. “Oh, I don’t care,” the manager exclaims, “I’ve got business everywhere!” Many of us can identify with the frenzied manager, feeling at times overwhelmed by the demands placed on our work time and energy. Unfortunately, choosing the “plane ticket to anywhere” approach—simply diving in and doing, with very little forethought or planning—will be just about as effective for us as for the manager in Clemmer’s story. Managing ourselves and our time well, and coaching those who look to us for leadership or advice to do the same, is a continual but far from impossible challenge. With a clear understanding of key principles and how to correctly apply those principles in real-world situations, we can be wise managers of our own time and help others to be similarly successful.

In today’s pressure-filled and fast-paced business world, the competition for our time and energy is intense. This lesson identifies the top time wasters, discusses three important keys to coaching employees to manage their time, and explains five enduring principles of effective time management.

HIRING PRACTICES TO WIN THE BEST

We are who we hire. Of all the resources we manage, the individuals who look to us for a paycheck have the single greatest impact on those we serve and on our success as a firm. They make us who or what we are today, and in large measure, they determine where the firm will be five, ten, or fifteen years from now. The battle for the best and brightest in our profession—whether it be new graduates, mid-career, experienced professionals, or seasoned leaders—is intense in today’s employment marketplace. To compete successfully in that arena, there is no room for mediocrity in any of our hiring practices. The best—the individuals we want to hire—have a wide universe of choices available to them, and can pick any car on the lot. To be successful in hiring the best, the opportunity we offer them must be seen as the best.

The professional gloves have definitely come off, and the battle for the very best employees is intense. After identifying the top ten mistakes firms commonly make in their hiring practices, this lesson teaches the vital keys firm leaders must understand to win the best.

COACHING FOR IMPROVED PERFORMANCE

Meaningful, positive change—refining existing skills and developing new ones, setting and accomplishing important goals, and doing what we do a little better today than yesterday—is one of life’s most exhilarating and rewarding experiences. It can also be one of the most challenging. Left completely on our own to get better and progress, some among us would quickly soar to the stars. The rest would likely be struggling to free themselves from the tangle of the underbrush. For most of us, becoming what we need to be is best accomplished with the aid of a coach, someone who can assist us in evaluating our current level of performance, help us set meaningful goals, hold us accountable, and join in celebrating our successes. To be successful leaders, we also need to learn how to be effective coaches.

Coaches play a vital role in the success of both those they coach and the firm. This lesson reviews the many benefits of effective coaching, discusses what good coaches do, and explains how coaches can help those they assist overcome the eight barriers to improved performance.

RESOLVING CONFLICTS BETWEEN EMPLOYEES

Given the strong opinions and personalities that exist in our diverse, dynamic, and sometimes pressure-filled workplaces, conflict between employees is inevitable. Properly managed, it can even be productive and generate worthwhile results. Left unresolved, however, it can produce a host of undesirable side effects, such as wasted energy, ill will between employees, erosion of team and firm unity, and damaged firm culture. Helping employees resolve significant differences is something few leaders look forward to doing, and most do it at a mediocre level. However, with an understanding of key principles and essential steps, leaders can improve their conflict resolution skills and help the firm avoid the damaging effects of contention in the workplace.

The strategy of hope seldom works to resolve employee conflicts. After identifying conflict's negative effects, its origins, and the danger signs leaders should watch for, this lesson outlines an eight-step process that can be used to successfully resolve many employee conflicts.

PREPARING MEANINGFUL PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

In many firms, the annual performance evaluation is the best opportunity to address both the strengths and deficiencies in an individual's job performance. All too frequently, though, the full benefits of this powerful process go unrealized. Imagine how differently the evaluation process might proceed if it was viewed as the centerpiece of an ongoing strategy to improve performance by maximizing individual strengths and mitigating weaknesses. Consider the likely outcomes if every member of the firm saw the annual evaluation as a time to acknowledge achievements, set challenging goals, plan growth opportunities, and help recipients make the most of their careers. Fundamental changes such as these are possible—in any firm and regardless of the evaluation tool used—when all firm members understand key principles and view the performance appraisal process as the incredible opportunity it can be, rather than the heavy burden it has too often been.

A thoughtfully prepared performance evaluation can be a great road map for helping individuals progress in their careers. This lesson discusses the many benefits of performance appraisals, identifies where we go wrong in the evaluation process, and offers ten keys to meaningful appraisals.