

GREAT Professional Service Firms

In the process of working with several hundred partners at a professional service firm, I began noodling about my ideal version thereof. It's a topic I've been intensely interested in for years—I see the “PSF” as a generic model for adding value in an era dominated by intellectual capital. What follows is an “ideal,” but, on the other hand, I think it is also an operational aspiration. Indeed, I think operationalizing an aspiration like this is imperative for such firms—size 1 to 10,001. (And, another hobbyhorse of mine, I “insist” that every “department” embrace some version of this professional-services-for-profit model—do so or prepare, inevitably, to be outsourced.)

1. Stunning commitment to integrity.
2. **Counselors/trusted advisors first.**
3. We are *not not not not* in a commodity business. (If it is a “commodity business,” then I, Tom Peters, am a commodity. NFW.)

***We are ... not not not not ... in a commodity business!
(If professional service = commodity. Ergo: TP = commodity.)***

4. Stellar *listeners*—to our Clients.
5. Stellar *listeners*—to our fellow partners.
6. Stellar *listeners*—to our most junior associates. (!!!!)
7. Stellar *listeners*—to every member of staff.
8. Insatiable curiosity marks 100% of us.
9. ***We live to serve/Extreme Service ethic.***
10. Our leaders are servant leaders. (Every partner is a leader/servant leader first.)
11. Deeply ingrained sense of fairness.
12. Hustlers—but thoughtful to a fault! (Excise rude bastards.)
13. ***“Service ethic” means service to one another as much as service to clients.***
14. ***Drop everything to assist a colleague in need—central to our overall ethos.***
15. A compensation scheme that unmistakably and visibly and dramatically rewards partner cooperation in developing and serving and retaining clients.

16. Toss “lousy colleagues” (bad teammates) out on their derrieres (asses). We will not tolerate less than class-A supportiveness; we will toss out top “rainmakers” who do not subscribe to our abiding teamwork ethic.

17. **Intellectual point of view that is Distinct/Exciting.**

18. We listen intently, but we also push our clients to explore significantly new approaches to doing business.

19. We insist, as best we can, that every client consider and test discontinuous change.

20. We understand that implementing our advice may require “culture change” in the client’s operation; we will leave a practical framework-process behind to help the client embrace and execute such excruciatingly difficult change.

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21. We will stretch our clients to the limits—but not suggest actions that are beyond the reach of implementation in the mid-term future. (“Never give an order that cannot be obeyed.”—MacArthur.)

22. We will intimately assist the client in achieving near-term “small wins” that signify and exemplify the changes the client intends to embrace.

23. **Every partner must have a point of view of note—and a point of view that is recognized far beyond our firm’s borders.**

24. The definition of the *very* best partners is that they are “insanely great” (thanks, Steve Jobs) mentors!

25. Equal compensation/recognition to top “rainmakers,” “intellectuals,” and “magical mentors.”

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26. We are all “rainmakers”—responsible for making it clear to the client that he/she made a great decision in associating with us.

27. Invest heavily in ideas—this means significant time and \$\$\$\$\$\$.

- 28. **Invest heavily in training and retraining.** (Our training will feature working with clients to implement our ideas, the managerial aspect of directing client engagements, the theory and art and practice of leadership, listening and presenting and understanding the “business principles” that are essential to our economic survival.)
- 29. **Technology pioneers.** (Yes, “pioneers.”)
- 30. **A decent share of oddballs/disturbers-of-the-peace.** (Often irritating people; get over it.)
- 31. **Relatively high turnover and very high diversity (background, gender, etc.) in top leadership posts and committees.**
- 32. **Quality >> Quantity.** (Big is fine as a byproduct of Great Work. “Big for big’s sake” is un-fine; economies of scale are overrated.)
- 33. **Significant portfolio of “interesting” clients.** (I.e., clients that lead us-drag us into new pastures.)
- 34. **A clear understanding that the “middle market” is often the key to success and vitality—we will not be conned by some specious/ego-centric need to be associated with the likes of the “Fortune 100.”**
- 35. **Willingness to dump bad-demotivating-energating clients (even big ones).**
- 36. **Understand that we are running a for-profit enterprise. Cash flow matters! (A lot.)**
- 37. **In love with our work!** (Expunge those who are not in love with their work—dump the burnouts.)
- 38. **Sense of fun.** (Yes, damn it.) (Make it a fun place to work—David Ogilvy.)
- 39. **Professional to a fault (we love the word “professional”) ... but not pompous.**
- 40. **“d”iversity—diversity of every flavor one can imagine.** (This is huge and often honored in the breach.)
- 41. **Notable-visible respect for the ideas of young associates. (!!!!!)**
- 42. **Practice-as-teamwork.** (Teammate-ism rewarded, lack thereof punished with extreme prejudice.)

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- 43. **Deep bench.** “Supporting cast,” notably starting with receptionist, must be of same quality as partners—there are no “bit players” in our business.
- 44. **Age gracefully gives way to youth—regeneration a deep-seated guiding belief.**
- 45. **Youth gracefully gives way to age—our most effective elders have much to teach us when, especially, it comes to client retention.**

- 46. Hard work expected and cherished—workaholism for workaholism’s sake assiduously guarded against.
- 47. Proud of our culture, guard our culture zealously—but even “great cultures” age. (And at the least become horribly elaborated.)
- 48. Rigorous evaluations of client satisfaction by more or less disinterested parties.
- 49. Sky-high time investment in our evaluation process.
- 50. My legacy (as a partner) is:

- Being “of service.”
- Developing people.
- Being a good colleague—which absorbed lots of my time.
- Doing consistently superior (sky high) quality work.
- Adding materially to the ideas base of the Firm.
- Insuring the continuity of the firm—culturally and financially.
- Being a paragon of integrity and decency.
- Leaving gracefully.

- 51. “Execution *is* strategy.” (Thanks, Fred Malek.)
- 52. My word is my bond.

53. **Wow!** (Aspiration for *every* assignment? Right? Why not? What else?)

54. **Excellence! PERIOD!** (Why not? What else?)

55. “Be the best. It’s the only market that’s not crowded.”—George Whalin

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