

A Blueprint To Save The Declining Firm

A Tale Of Business Salvation, Well Told

AT THE CROSSROADS, by Gale Crosley, CPA and Debbie Stover. John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, N.J., 2008. 194 pp. To order click [here](#).

There are messages that are hard to impart, however true or important they are. There are messages that run counter to conventional wisdom, despite their validity. There are messages that are so important that you want to grab your subject by the lapels, shake and stare him or her directly in the eye, and shout, "Listen to me!"

A famous Shakespearean actor (Gielgud, I think it was) once said that the hardest part of doing the Hamlet soliloquies was getting into them before the audience knew what he was doing. Otherwise, he would hear a murmuring behind his performance as the audience mouthed the words along with him. So it is for those who would impart messages that portend change, where change is traditionally resisted.

One such message is that marketing is as integral a part of managing a professional firm as cash flow management or human resources or paying taxes. Those of us in the marketing business attest, over and over again, to the difficulty of imparting that message to law and accounting firm management. There are several reasons for this, I think. First, there's no tradition of frank marketing in the professions, and although the *Bates Decision* (*Bates v. State Bar of Arizona*) which, in 1977, enabled frank marketing has been in place in all this time, there are still them as don't get the message. There are otherwise bright people who hear it, but don't believe it. More significantly, there are those who hear it, but can't fit it into their traditional thinking, as if the message were in a foreign tongue.

Another such message, equally important, is that law and accounting firms can no longer, in this competitive environment, reside in traditional professional management structures, attitudes, and practices. The environment in which professional firms practice has changed, and the clients, not the professionals, now drive the practice. (Forgive the personal note, but this is the message that August Aquila and I tried to impart in our book, *Client at the Core* [John Wiley & Sons, 2004]). After the many decades of my involvement with the professions, I am still stunned by the fact that despite the vast changes in the economic and social environment of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, the professions seem oblivious to the kaleidoscopic changes surrounding them.

Fortunate we are, then, that one of the most thoughtful and knowledgeable individuals serving the professions has come up with a solution. In conjunction with a

highly talented writer, Gale Crosley, a widely respected consultant to the accounting profession (and a CPA herself as well) has written a business novel that puts the kind of teeth in the message that makes it hard to ignore.

What the authors have done is to invent a fictional accounting firm in trouble, and in a riveting narrative, describe the way out, step by step. Its message is too urgent and on target to ignore; its narrative so compelling to read that it's impossible to put down until the last period. Two giant talents bring synergy to an important subject.

While this kind of business novel is not new, it rarely succeeds as this one does, simply because Crosley knows the answers to the right questions, and Stover, a former McGraw-Hill editor and widely published author, knows how to make her material sing.

The plot is simple. Joe, the managing partner of an accounting firm is in trouble. It's growth is static, and it's partners are in turmoil. He runs into an old friend, himself the managing partner of a successful firm, who agrees to help Joe go step by step through a process to revitalize and reorganize the firm. Partners are reassessed, and the antiquated business model is upgraded. Internal dissensions defused, and crucial steps are taken to bring harmony to an otherwise dysfunctional family. Marketing is integrated into the management structure, and new procedures are devised to keep the firm competitive and accelerate growth.

Fiction it may be, but it's no fairy tale. Every observation is real, and undoubtedly drawn from Crosley's observations and experience. Every solution, and the way it's applied, is likewise real, and not merely theoretical.

The result is a handbook and a blueprint, couched in fictional terms but profoundly real in its lessons, that offers the least successful firm the opportunity to change, and the most successful firm to improve its dynamics. And while it uses a CPA firm as its model, every lesson is as valid for law firms.

This is not merely a good read, although good read it indeed is. It's a clarion call to bring professional firms into the new competitive environment, and to keep them relevant to the changing nature of the dynamic clientele now served by the 21st century professional firm.

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