

Addressing Economic Realities to Help DRI Members Achieve Their Goals

Practice “Angst”**By J. Michael Weston, DRI President Elect**

I have increasingly become a fan of the Urban Dictionary. Some of the definitions are humorous, some topical, and many more accurate than more established lexicons.

A good example is the Urban Dictionary definition of “angst.” It says, “Angst, often confused with anxiety, is a transcendent emotion in that it combines the unbearable anguish of life with the hopes of overcoming this seemingly impossible situation. Without the important element of hope, then the emotion is anxiety, not angst.”

As I travel the country in my year as DRI President Elect, I meet more and more of our members who are experiencing “angst” in their daily lives and practices. There have been tremendous changes in the relationship between our members in private practice and our clients over the past decade. The economic slowdown of 2008 has caused all businesses to look carefully at how they produce goods and services. For our corporate clients, the economic reality caused them to seek efficiencies at every level. Six Sigma and lean processing exercises abounded. Functions were combined, waste cut, and businesses emerged leaner and more focused.

And the change was and is being felt by our private practitioners. We have seen rather dramatic changes in relationships with clients that we had worked with for many years. Many insurance carriers left markets that they had been in for years. Others consolidated their work in fewer firms within the state or went to a regional or national approach, taking all of the defense work outside the state. In an effort to control costs, carriers and corporations carefully scrutinized our rates and the staffing of cases that we were defending. They questioned the efficacy of our tactics and whether a motion or deposition reduced the risk or improved the chances for success. They demanded more from us at less cost. In effect, they were asking us to do what they themselves had done.

As small business owners, we have to assimilate this change in the context of our own organizations. We are typically not as hierarchical as our corporate clients. Change comes more slowly. We tend to vote on things and do not like close votes. We want unanimity or as close to it as we can get. We are not good at testing things before we try something new, so we tend to be risk averse. So at the end of the day we feel stuck—or (new word) angstful?

So what is DRI doing about our members’ plight? We are increasing our efforts to make certain that our private practitioner members can set their aspiration goals

and achieve them. First, we have convened a task force to focus on the needed skills of the twenty-first century lawyer, a process that DRI President Mary Massaron Ross initiated with her 2012 Annual Meeting theme. Task force chair Chrys Martin and vice chair Craig Mayfield expect to make specific recommendations in early summer for new and innovative programming to assist you in developing skills necessary to resolve disputes both today and in the future.

Second, under the leadership of DRI Immediate Past President Henry Sneath, DRI Law Practice Management Committee Chair Jay Courie, and DRI Law Practice Management Committee Vice Chair John Trimble, we are developing programs to help you manage your practices and law firms more efficiently, helping you become more financially successful. The LPM Committee will help you frame the business issues you face so that you can make decisions more quickly and effectively, understanding the legal environment and having practice development assets at hand.

Third, we are producing a law practice management book specifically geared to the defense practice of the twenty-first century. Under the leadership of the DRI Publications Board led by its chair, Tom Segalla, and vice chair, Lise Spacapan, and with the able assistance of our project editor, Stephen Acker, we will provide you with a living volume that will give you practical solutions to the business challenges that you face each day.

Fourth, our DRI For Life Task Force conceived by DRI First Vice President John Parker Sweeney and chaired by James Holland is working to bring value to your career across its breadth and provide programming and opportunities so you will always be ascending.

Finally, the 2013 Annual Meeting in Chicago, October 16–20, will focus on energizing your life and your career. We expect to have an array of nationally known speakers to provide you with powerful practice development skills that you can take back to your offices and put to use. DRI Annual Meeting Chair Lori Berke and DRI Annual Meeting Vice Chair John Kuppens are putting together an outstanding program.

In closing, know that the leadership of DRI is committed to having all of our members follow and maintain a successful career path, doing what we can to lessen the angst and increase the hope and reality. We look forward to working with you and hearing your thoughts and comments as to what would benefit you going forward. 