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Great Advice Comes from Happy Lawyers: Interpreting Law Firm Rankings on the OCBJ's "Best Places to Work" List

By Paul J. Fraidenburgh and Martin P. Florman

We've all heard the California dairy industry's charming slogan: "Great cheese comes from happy cows. Happy cows come from California." Perhaps this slogan appeals to us because it evokes imagery of green pastures and sunshine. Perhaps it touches home because, as Californians, we know how lucky we are to live here. The more likely explanation for this slogan's success is that it somehow makes sense that happy animals produce a better product. This begs the question: does the same principle apply to attorneys?

It is a well-documented fact of the legal community that happiness in law firms is on the decline. A 2016 American Bar Association and Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation study found that a staggering 28% of licensed, employed lawyers suffer from depression.

Notwithstanding the trend, happy lawyers do exist, and they bring significant advantages to the table for their clients. Happy lawyers work the same long hours as other lawyers and navigate the same high-pressure and high stakes situations, but the happy lawyer brings energy where the jaded lawyer brings cynicism. Happy lawyers are confident where unhappy lawyers are disheartened. Happy lawyers are creative, nimble, and resourceful where burnt-out lawyers are unimaginative and uninspired. Though there are plenty of Scrooges out there who have found success notwithstanding their emotionally draining workplace, the traits of a happy lawyer translate directly into tools for better advice, representation, creativity and client service.

And when it comes to happy lawyers, not all law firms are created equal. There are firms full of highly skilled lawyers who are miserable and there are firms that work hard to create and protect a culture that fosters happiness and success. Like cows, happy lawyers herd together.



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