

Success *in* Succession

By involving her team in nearly every aspect of her practice, Sally Law ensured its future.

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I didn't see in myself

Sally Law and Janice Henderson

When Sally Law placed the help-wanted ad, no longer than three lines, in The Washington Post, she had no inkling it would secure the legacy of her financial planning practice. When Janice Henderson answered it, she had no idea it would lead to owning a business, thinking about her own successor or chasing down a runaway llama.

In 1994, each seemed equally unlikely.

Law & Associates, Inc., founded by Law in 1980 in Glen Echo, Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C., was largely a star practice at the time, though Law was eager to share the spotlight. Henderson was focused on planning, just looking to do good work. In their first meeting, Law saw something in Henderson, a quiet confidence, and knew she was the one for the job.

Turns out, she was right for much more.

Twenty-three years later, the women are completely in sync. They share the same values. They finish each other's stories. They talk about how seamlessly Law & Associates has transitioned from Law to the associates.

Succession planning at its organic best.

One year into a formal five-year succession period, the plan is working well.

"We have the same value system when it comes to our clients," said Law. "We want the same things. We want success for each other, we want success for the clients."

At first, however, Henderson resisted assuming the mantle of full responsibility.

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at the time. – JANICE HENDERSON

"When she approached me initially, I said, 'Oh, Sally, why don't you find someone else – I'm not sure I really want that – and I will be part of the team,'" Henderson said. "Sally was very patient. She must have seen something in me that I didn't see in myself at the time."

Law's succession plan was rooted in her business strategy. Through the years, she gave of herself and her practice to her employees. She involved them in the client process. She took them to local and national conferences. She paid them salaries and offered benefits. She gave them responsibilities, then she gave them different responsibilities, looking for strengths.

"Sally was never alone in a meeting with a client, because she didn't want that client to only know her face," Henderson said. "If there was a question or anything came up, they would feel comfortable going to one of us instead of Sally."

"I wanted whoever was in the room to be hearing what I was hearing," Law said, "because we were going to be running a financial plan, we were going to be working with our client and investing for them. And I wanted to make sure we were all on the same frequency."

About 10 years after Henderson arrived, Law elevated her to co-branch manager, an important decision Law felt certain making. About five years ago, Henderson became chief compliance officer and soon after that president.

Gradually, the power shifted, and Law proudly watched the process she had put in motion come to fruition.

"I think I had to grow into it," said Henderson, now formally the CEO. "It was something that I didn't know I would be doing. But after working here for that long, and the clients – so many of them are more than clients, they're friends – you want to continue to be here for them and their family."

Clients were comforted to know the practice would continue.

"Clients would ask about who would take over, and I was able to sweep my hands around and say, 'Everyone here,' and then point to Janice," Law said. "At the age of 74 and after 44 years in the business, it was time to move on. It is just being respectful of clients' needs and building a strong practice that does not need me to function."

Law comes to the office, about a half mile down the hill from her home, one day or two a week. Her name remains on all client accounts, and will until 2020, though Henderson makes the decisions.

"And the clients know that," Henderson said. "Yes, she's still here, but they know

she's not involved in the day-to-day.

I haven't had one client be concerned about any of it, because of our long-term relationship and how they've gotten very comfortable with me and with the others. When Sally is here and the clients come in they love to see her, it's become more of a social thing with them."

Certainly, Law has social skills.

"So, you want me to tell about the time Janice had a petting zoo?" Law asked.

Henderson's birthday is in July, when school is out, so Law typically plans a team-building celebration to which associates bring their families. The pizza party at her house up the hill was well underway when a man showed up and asked Henderson if it was her birthday.

"And with that came the llamas and horses, goats, baby pigs – the teacup pig is Janice's favorite," Law said, barely containing her laughter. "We had a lovely time. Didn't we have an escaping, was it a pony or a llama, that Janice had to chase down and bring back?"

"Luckily," Henderson said, "it wasn't that fast."

Time, however, moves quite swiftly. Before she knows it, Henderson, 54, will be in the same situation as Law, looking for someone to take over the practice when she decides to ease into retirement.

"Since it became formal with Sally and me, that's the next question," Henderson said. "Who will be there to take over for me?"

Law has the answer.

"That begins to define itself," she said. "Your employees, if they've been with you for any time, you get to know who you think can handle it and who can't. You get to know your people."

Right down to their favorite farm animals. 🐾