

So I'm Trained ... Now What?

Amy Lambert, JD

You've just returned from Collaborative family law training and you're full of energy to integrate your new education into your practice. You're eagerly anticipating your first Collaborative case, but nothing happens. A few weeks go by. You continue to stare longingly at your training notebook on your bookshelf, but still no Collaborative cases fall in your lap. Now what?

This article focuses on the issues facing the new Collaborative practitioner as he or she tries to break into the Collaborative community.

1. Get plugged in to your Collaborative community

If you live in a city where Collaborative training has been available, you've probably already met a few local Collaborative professionals. Ask around about "practice groups" – a group of Collaborative professionals organized to accomplish a goal, e.g., marketing, referral of business, continuing education, raising community awareness, etc. How many groups are there in town? Are they "open" or "by invitation only?" What are the benefits of joining a particular group?

Chances are good that there are several practice groups with varied purposes. Some are open, free, informal groups that meet regularly and serve as educational and networking resources for Collaborative attorneys, mental health professionals and financial neutrals. Volunteers present programs on Collaborative topics ranging from "How to work more effectively with neutrals" to "How to keep the process moving toward resolution." Often, more seasoned Collaborative practitioners field questions from the newer attendees, and ideas (and business cards) are exchanged freely. Other, more formal practice groups are more structured, and admission requires approval of the group. Often one of the main purposes of these groups is to market Collaborative Law to the community. Making a connection with an ongoing practice group can boost you into a position to get more cases.

If you live in an area where no Collaborative Practice groups exist, then start your own! It can begin as simply as meeting another Collaborative professional to discuss how you will increase your Collaborative business. After attending Collaborative training in January 2006, two attorneys from Lubbock, Texas, did just that, founding the Collaborative Law Professionals of Lubbock County. This multi-disciplinary group now meets monthly to network and share practice tips.

Join the IACP and complete your member profile, including a picture. Definitely take advantage of this great member benefit! Not sure what to write? Check out some of the other members' profiles at www.collaborativepractice.com.

The bottom line is that you want other folks in your community to know that you are now a Collaborative professional and that you are eager to assist any clients they refer to you.

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2. Get a mentor

A mentor can be indispensable as you begin your Collaborative practice. Whether your mentor is in the next office or 400 miles away, it's great to have someone to turn to when you inevitably have questions in your first Collaborative case. A mentor can also be useful before you get your first case in answering questions such as: What's the biggest mistake you see other Collaborative attorneys make? What are your favorite habits and qualities of a good Collaborative practitioner?

Many statewide organizations have mentorship programs as part of their member benefits. If yours does not, why not get involved with your statewide Collaborative community and start one. At the very least, your name will become known to the leading Collaborative professionals in your area, and that can never be a bad thing for you. Research shows that there is a high correlation between competence and community involvement, so get in there and make something happen.

Maybe you can also find a mentor among the course leaders who taught your Collaborative training. Generosity of spirit is one of the commonalities among Collaborative professionals, and most Collaborative professionals are eager to see committed, enthusiastic, energetic new faces on the Collaborative scene. Ask if you can "shadow" a case to see how the most experienced Collaborative practitioners in your area manage cases. Often, this is the best way to develop your own unique Collaborative style. As an extra bonus, your name will be on the radar screen of the experienced professionals you interact with, and they are great sources for referrals.

3. Cultivate referrals

Let your existing referral network know that you have added Collaborative Law to the range of services you provide your clients. For many referral partners, you may need to explain exactly what Collaborative Law is. The IACP has developed

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excellent brochures that are available to members to assist in educating others. You can include a brochure in your letter to referral sources.

Many Collaborative professionals maintain a list of other collaborators that they provide to their clients to share with their spouses to assist them in selecting a Collaborative team. As you meet other Collaborative professionals in your area, ask that they consider you when compiling their list of local Collaborative practitioners, and let them know that you will return the courtesy.

4. Get a Web presence

Research shows that the Internet is a first-stop source of information for people who are considering a divorce because research can be done quickly and in private. Today's client is internet-savvy AND internet-educated, often spending hours researching divorce and divorce professionals before ever making the first phone call. Hopefully, you already have a web site and it's receiving many, many hits a day. If not, add it to your to-do list. Let your potential clients know that you provide the option of a Collaborative Divorce as one of your services in your very FIRST contact with them on your web page.

5. Get going!

One thing we know for sure is that nothing happens if you do nothing. Just as we tell our Collaborative clients that they are responsible for the outcome of their cases, YOU are responsible for the influx of your cases. Be creative. Do something different.

Take the steps to ensure that you are on the leading edge of the wave as it sweeps over the world.

Make a speech, send out letters, volunteer to help low-income families restructure their families. Collaborative Practice is growing rapidly worldwide as clients realize that there is finally another option to mediation and litigation for resolution of family law matters. Take the steps to ensure that you are on the leading edge of the wave as it sweeps over the world.

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FROM THE COLLABORATIVE CORNER

Stu Webb, JD

Many Collaborative practitioners have noticed the spiritual aspects of Collaborative Practice – and I do mean *spiritual* aspects as opposed to religious aspects, because, in this context, religion has little application. In my view, a focus on the spiritual vision of our work helps not only the practitioner, but benefits the clients as well.

What is Spirituality?

“Spirituality,” simply put, is the release of the qualities of the human spirit. Spirituality is accessing your higher-consciousness state – it is what you feel when your mind is free of judgments and negative thoughts and is focused in quiet observation. It is what's going on when your body tingles with positive energy – when what shows up in your interactions with others are such attributes as compassion, patience, regard, tolerance, common sense and clear insight. Isn't that great?

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Other labels for the spiritual “space” are: good-feeling tone; centering; spirit-in-action; well-being; embracing your true nature. Don't worry what you call it, the feeling itself is what is important.

Benefits of Bringing Spirituality into Collaborative Practice

Collaborative Practice can reach its highest spiritual potential if one or more of the participants is “holding the space” from a spiritual standpoint. No particular training is necessary to make this happen. If the entire group sets an intention to access a clearer state, the possibility of a spiritually-infused process is set in motion. Given the proper guidance, the divorcing couple can sometimes “get it” faster than some of the practitioners!

In the spiritual space, the participants tend to see things from a higher perspective. They are able literally to “get over” the situation which is viewed as a problem. Clients and Collaborative professionals alike are freer to see and understand the other participants' points of view, and so are more ready to explore ways to satisfy the clients' interests. They feel less insecure and threatened in the process if they are in touch with their spiritual selves.