
C H A P T E R

1

The Story of Edward and Abigail

Michael E. Gerber

*To understand the heart and mind of a person, look not at what he has
already achieved, but at what he aspires to.*

—Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam*

Every business is a family business. To ignore this truth is to
court disaster.

This is true whether or not family members actually
work in the business. Whatever their relationship with the business,
every member of an attorney's family will be greatly affected by the
decisions the attorney makes about the business.

Unfortunately, attorneys tend to compartmentalize their lives
unless family members are actively involved in their legal practice.
Attorneys see their practice as separate from their family, and
concepts like attorney-client privilege only reinforce that belief.
They view their practice as a profession—what they do—and
therefore none of their family's business.

2 The E-Myth Attorney

“This doesn’t concern you,” says the attorney to her husband.

“I leave business at the office and my family at home,” says the attorney, with blind conviction.

And with equal conviction, I say, “Not true!”

In actuality, your family and legal practice are inextricably linked to one another. What’s happening in your practice is also happening at home. Consider the following and ask yourself whether each one is true:

- If you’re angry at work, you’re also angry at home.
- If you’re out of control in your legal practice, you’re equally out of control at home.
- If you’re having trouble with money in your practice, you’re also having trouble with money at home.
- If you have communication problems in your practice, you’re also having communication problems at home.
- If you don’t trust in your practice, you don’t trust at home.
- If you’re secretive in your practice, you’re equally secretive at home.

And you’re paying a huge price for each of these! The truth is that your practice and your family are one—and you’re the link. Or you should be. Because if you try to keep your practice and your family apart, if your practice and your family are strangers, you will effectively create two separate worlds that can never wholeheartedly serve each other. Two worlds that split each other apart.

Let me tell you the story of Edward and Abigail.

Edward and Abigail met their senior year in college. While participating in a campus party celebrating the 200-year birthday of the U.S. Constitution, they sat next to each other and talked for hours. They were both pre-law and passionately committed to improving the nation’s justice system. They’d watched as America’s trust in its politicians was slowly eroded by a series of political scandals, beginning with Watergate in the 1970s and continuing

into the 1980s with the FBI Abscam sting in which one senator, five members of the House of Representatives, and several other high-ranking government officials were convicted of accepting bribes.

Edward was impressed by Abigail's extensive social work in the community, and Abigail thought Edward was the most dynamic man she had ever met. It wasn't long before they were engaged and planning their future together.

While Edward attended law school, Abigail pursued a master's degree in social work. Over the next few years, the couple worked various jobs to keep their finances afloat. They were often exhausted and struggled to make ends meet, but they were committed to what they were doing and to each other.

After receiving his J.D. degree and passing the state bar, Edward went to work for a medium-sized law firm. Soon afterward, the couple had their first daughter, and Abigail decided to take some time off from her job as a social worker to be a stay-at-home mom. Those were good years. They dearly loved each other, were active members of their church, participated in community organizations, and spent quality time together. All in all, they considered themselves one of the most fortunate families they knew.

But work became troublesome. Edward grew increasingly frustrated with the way the firm was run. "I want to go into business for myself," he announced one night at the dinner table. "I want to start my own practice."

Edward and Abigail spent many nights talking about the move. Was it something they could afford? Did Edward really have the skills necessary to make a legal practice a success? Were there enough clients to go around? What impact would such a move have on their lifestyle, on their daughter, on their relationship? They asked all the questions they thought they needed to answer before going into business for themselves . . . but they never really drew up a concrete plan.

Finally, tired of talking and confident that he could handle whatever he might face, Edward committed to starting his own legal practice. Because she loved and supported him, Abigail agreed,

4 The E-Myth Attorney

offering her own commitment to help in any way she could. So Edward quit his job at the firm, took out a second mortgage on their home, and leased a small office.

In the beginning, things went well. A building boom had hit the town, and new families were pouring into the area. Edward had no trouble getting new clients. His practice expanded, quickly outgrowing his office.

Within a year, Edward had employed two full-time paralegals. He also hired a bookkeeper named Rebecca to take care of the money and a receptionist named Emily to handle the telephone and administrative responsibilities. Edward was ecstatic with the progress his young practice had made. He celebrated by taking his wife and daughter on vacation to Maui.

Of course, managing a business was more complicated and time consuming than working for someone else. Edward not only supervised all the jobs his people did, but he was continually looking for work to keep everyone busy. When he wasn't scanning legal journals to stay abreast of what was going on in his field, he was editing briefs, revising client contracts, and wading through endless piles of paperwork. He also found himself spending more and more time on the telephone, mostly dealing with client complaints and nurturing relationships.

As the months went by and more and more clients came through the door, Edward had to spend even more time just trying to keep his head above water.

By the end of its second year, the practice, now employing four full-time and two part-time people, had moved to a larger office downtown. The demands on Edward's time had grown with the practice.

He began leaving home earlier in the morning and returning home later at night. He rarely saw his daughter anymore. For the most part, Edward was resigned to the problem. He saw the hard work as essential to building the "sweat equity" he had long heard about.

Money was also becoming a problem for Edward. Although the practice was growing like crazy, money always seemed scarce when

it was really needed. He had discovered that clients were often slow to pay.

When Edward had worked at someone else's law firm, he had been paid twice a month; in his own practice, he often had to wait—sometimes for months. He was still owed money on cases he had completed more than 90 days before.

Of course, no matter how slowly Edward got paid, he still had to pay *his* people. This became a relentless problem. Edward often felt like a juggler dancing on a tightrope. A fire burned in his stomach day and night.

To make matters worse, Edward began to feel that Abigail was insensitive to his troubles. Not that he often talked to his wife about the practice. "Business is business" was Edward's mantra. "It's my responsibility to handle things at the office and Abigail's responsibility to take care of our daughter, the house, and me."

Abigail's seeming lack of understanding rankled Edward. Didn't she see that he had a practice to take care of? That he was doing it all for his family? Apparently not.

As time went on, Edward became even more consumed by his practice. Not surprisingly, Abigail grew more frustrated by her husband's lack of communication and increasingly long hours. She'd put her own social work on hold to focus on their family, and now her husband was hardly ever at home. Their relationship grew tense and strained. The rare moments they *were* together were more often than not peppered by long silences—a far cry from the fiery discussions and impassioned dreaming that had characterized their relationship's early days.

Meanwhile, Rebecca, the bookkeeper, was becoming a problem for Edward. Rebecca never seemed to have the financial information Edward needed to make decisions about payroll, client billing, and general operating expenses, let alone how much money was available for Edward and Abigail's living expenses.

When questioned, Rebecca would shift her gaze to her feet and say, "Listen, Edward, I've got a lot more to do around here than you can imagine. It'll take a little more time. Just don't press me, okay?"

6 The E-Myth Attorney

Overwhelmed by his own work, Edward usually backed off. The last thing Edward wanted was to upset Rebecca and have to do the books himself. He could also empathize with what Rebecca was going through, given the practice's growth over the past year.

Late at night in his office, Edward would sometimes recall his first years out of law school. He missed the simple life he and his family had shared. Then, as quickly as the thoughts came, they would vanish. He had work to do and no time for daydreaming. "Having my own law practice is a great thing," he would remind himself. "I simply have to apply myself, as I did in school, and get on with the job. I have to work as hard as I always have when something needed to get done."

Edward began to live most of his life inside his head. He began to distrust his people. They never seemed to work hard enough or to care about his practice as much as he did. If he wanted to get something done, he usually had to do it himself.

Then one day, the receptionist, Emily, quit in a huff, frustrated by the amount of work that he was demanding of her. Edward was left with a desk full of papers and a telephone that wouldn't stop ringing.

Clueless about the work Emily had done, Edward was overwhelmed by having to pick up the pieces of a job that he didn't understand. His world turned upside down. He felt like a stranger in his own practice.

Why had he been such a fool? Why hadn't he taken the time to learn what Emily did in the office? Why had he waited until now?

Ever the trouper, Edward plowed into Emily's job with everything he could muster. What he found shocked him. Emily's work space was a disaster area! Her desk drawers were a jumble of papers, coins, pens, pencils, erasers, rubber bands, envelopes, business cards, and candy.

"What was she thinking?" Edward raged.

When he got home that night, even later than usual, he got into a shouting match with Abigail. He settled it by storming out of the house to get a drink. Didn't anybody understand him? Didn't

anybody care what he was going through? Was there just no justice in the world?

He returned home only when he was sure that Abigail was asleep. As he walked by the computer, he noticed an unfinished e-mail up on the screen. One phrase practically leapt off the page: "Do you know of any good divorce lawyers in the area? I'd prefer not to use a former colleague of Edward's."

The e-mail was from his wife to her sister.

That night Edward slept on the couch. He left early in the morning before anyone was awake. For perhaps the first time in all his years as an attorney, he was in no mood for questions or arguments.

When Edward got to his office the next morning, he immediately headed for the liquor cabinet beside the desk . . . and you can imagine how the situation goes from here.

What lessons can we draw from Edward and Abigail's story? As I've already emphatically said, every business is a family business. Every business profoundly touches every family member, even those not working in the business. Every business either gives to the family or takes from the family, just as individual family members do.

If the business takes more than it gives, the family is always the first to pay the price.

In order for Edward to free himself from the prison he created, he would first have to admit his vulnerability. He would have to confess to himself and his family that he really doesn't know enough about his own practice and how to grow it.

Edward tried to do it all himself. Had he succeeded, had the practice supported his family in the style he imagined, he would have burst with pride. Instead, Edward unwittingly isolated himself, thereby achieving the exact opposite of what he sought.

He destroyed his life—and his family's life along with it.

Repeat after me: *Every business is a family business.*

Are you like Edward? I believe that all attorneys share a common soul with him. You must learn that a business is only a business. It is not your life. But it is also true that your business can have a

8 The E-Myth Attorney

profoundly negative impact on your life unless you learn how to do it differently than most attorneys do it, that is, differently than Edward did it.

Edward's legal practice could have served his and his family's life. But for that to happen, he would have had to learn how to master his practice in a way that was completely foreign to him.

Instead, Edward's practice consumed him. Lacking a true understanding of the essential strategic thinking that would have allowed him to create something unique, Edward and his family were doomed before he even opened his doors.

This book contains the secrets that Edward should have known. By applying the principles we'll discuss here, you can avoid a similar fate.

Let's start with the subject of *money*. But, before we do, let's listen to the lawyer's view about the story I just told you. Let's talk about the story of you and yours by Robert and Sandy.

www.michaellegerber.com/attorney