

**Ep #30: From Solo to CEO:
Lessons in Building a People-First Law Firm with Justie Nicol**



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John E. Grant

[The Agile Attorney](#) with John E. Grant

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There's a lot about the process of becoming a lawyer, of developing your skills once you're out in legal practice, and then doing the legal work that encourages solid individual performance. And it's normal for any professional to want to strive for individual excellence. But when you make the transition to working on a team, or especially leading that team, including owning a law firm, focusing too much on individual excellence can actually get in the way of solving for overall team excellence.

In today's episode, I'm excited to bring you an interview with my friend, my sometime client, and just all-around great person, Justie Nicol. Because Justie tells her story of how she's transitioned from being an excellent individual performer as an attorney to embracing her role as leader, as manager, and really as key enabler for the rest of her team to do the best work they can do.

That way they can all scale their impact on their practice, and more importantly, they can scale their impact on the community that they serve. Ready to become a more agile attorney? Let's go.

Welcome to *The Agile Attorney* podcast powered by Agile Attorney Consulting. I'm John Grant, and I've spent the last decade helping lawyers and legal teams harness the tools of modern entrepreneurship to build practices that are profitable, scalable, and sustainable for themselves and their communities. In each episode I offer principles, practices, and other ideas to help legal professionals of all kinds be more agile in your legal practice.

John Grant: All right, I am so excited this week to have my friend and colleague and former client, Justie Nicol. Thank you for coming on to the podcast.

Justie Nicol: Thank you so much for having me.

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John: So I'm going to let you introduce yourself. Tell us a little bit about who you are, what you do, and how you got here.

Justie: Sure thing. My name is Justie Nicol. I am primarily a criminal defense attorney, at least that was my legal background. However, I have transitioned more into law firm ownership and management of people than anything else at this stage of my career. I work and founded Colorado Lawyer Team almost ten years ago, if you can believe it. Oh my God.

Yeah, it was March of 2015 when I started on my own, and it's been a wild ride since then.

John: Very cool. And so the practice that you have is still focused on criminal law?

Justie: That's our primary area. We also have attorneys who do family law, civil litigation, and a little bit of employment law. I should say, either employee or employer side.

John: Got it. And tell me about the makeup of your team as it is now. And then we'll talk about the evolution, because I know there's been some rides in terms of getting to where you are now.

Justie: Yeah. Right now, I just hired a baby lawyer. She took the bar last month. So as soon as she passes and gets sworn in, we'll have five attorneys in the firm, two paralegals, remote VA. And then we use a bunch of technology. We also have a file clerk.

John: Well, I should have you talk just a minute about your tech stack, because you're really good at technology.

Justie: Yeah, the tech stack, I think by itself is at least another full-time employee, if not two. We use a number of different programs and they all

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kind of mesh together. The first being Lawmatics for intake and CRM, and then Clio for practice management software.

We use Dropbox because I don't like Clio's documents system. But we also use Lawyaw, now Clio Draft for drafting, especially on the civil side. When we added that practice area, we brought in some more heavy lifting on drafting.

And then we use Smith AI for receptionist services and Zapier to really connect all of it. We use Slack; we're a remote team. So 100% of our office time is spent at home. If we're in court, the attorneys obviously have to be in person in court. But I've had employees in Oklahoma, Florida, Florida, Alabama, Ecuador, Argentina, and another Argentina.

John: Holy cow. Okay. So the virtual law firm is real and possible and it can work.

Justie: Yep. And we use it as a selling point. So it's cheaper than paying rent, faster than paying rent, and more reliable, especially during COVID, than having an office space.

John: Yeah. So I want to ask about your backstory, but before I do, let's dive in a little bit. With a fully remote team, what are the things that you do to try to maintain collegiality, camaraderie, culture, obviously communication about the legal matters themselves? But how do you also maintain your identity as an organization when you're all fully remote?

Justie: We've kind of got the cadence figured out a little bit, but it has taken some trial and error and it takes buy-in from everybody on the team. And some weeks we don't get everybody to participate, but normally what we do is a Monday morning check-in and I ask three questions on Slack. It's a Geekbot automated system.

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So the three questions that we ask every Monday morning, and we ask everybody on the team, whether they're contract or virtual or what, we always ask: How busy are you feeling? Not, "How much white space is on your calendar? Don't open your calendar. Tell me what you feel like when you first log in for this thing Monday morning."

How busy are you feeling for the upcoming week? Do you have capacity to take on more work this week? And then, what does help look like? What is awesome about that was...

I put that together after working with you for so many years. It really gets a gauge for capacity for the entire team. And it deals with burnout, because so much of what we do as lawyers especially in criminal and family law, it takes a toll. Vicarious trauma is real. So when I have an associate... Like this week, I have an associate who's in court five days out of the week. That wasn't supposed to be the plan, but we had another associate come out sick on Monday.

And so we just pivoted, because that's what you've got to do. But I knew that that was going to be a problem for her because she told me, "I'm in court five days this week. I cannot take any more on." And so I stepped up and started working on things that we're co-counseling together, and in the background take some of that load off of her.

It's not just me doing that, which is amazing. My whole team will see if somebody's overwhelmed, and they will all pitch in before I even have to ask them. So it is absolutely amazing when somebody says they're burning out, if they're saying, "I'm too busy. I can't figure myself out..." And people put personal things in there, too. Like, "I'm going on vacation next week. And I'm so stressed because I don't think I'm ready."

How can we support you for that? So the whole team really rallies around people in that sense. And then, it helps me too, to divvy up the workload a

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little bit when somebody is like, “Yeah, I can take on more work. I’m only a five out of 10.”

I’m like, okay, that tells me who has time to take on more stuff. So that’s our Monday morning stand up. We only do that once a week. We also do a Wednesday lunch meeting where we talk about “Wednesday woes”. So, what sucks? And usually that is horror stories or personal stuff. Sometimes it’s the weather, right? And everybody has to say something.

And then we also give “row graves” to each other, which are bonus points that I actually put money behind. So based on each quarter’s percentage of points, that’s how much bonus money you get as an employee; based on how many points the team has given you throughout the last three months.

John: Oh, that’s fascinating.

Justie: And we do things for row graves like exceptional casework, caseload heavy lifting, but also living our core values. So, being ambitious rebels, treating people like VIP, teamwork, communications. Those are things that are our core values. And so it was really important that we touch those core values on a weekly basis.

John: Yes. Oh, okay. There are so many things I love about that... And of course, I recognize some of it from the work that we did together years ago... but starting with the honest reckoning of capacity. And I love the fact that you focus primarily on subjective capacity, not objective capacity, right?

Because it is really a feeling. It’s the emotional load that it takes to do the hard areas of law that you work in. I think that’s just so important to be doing those check-ins. And of course, the broader principle. And as I said before we turned on the microphone, one of the reasons I really wanted to have you on the show is because I think you’re so good with that Agile Core Value of respect for people.

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And just everything you've said right now really echoes that. And the fact that you're so intentional about your firm's mission and values; who you're for, what you're for, what's the type of organization you want to be? I mean, it all just completely rings true to what I know of you.

But just to hear you talk about it in practice, kudos for really putting in the work. Because I know it's not easy to develop and to stick to that, right? Because all of the pressures of running a business, of the client work and everything else, it's trying to pull you out of those core values a lot of the time.

Justie: Yeah, and that was the thing that was missing from that cadence, right? What I wasn't talking about was the casework, because that is an important part of running a law firm, but it's not the only important part. And so Monday mornings, we do have a case audit meeting where we go through all of our cases and touch everything and divvy up work and delegate.

And so we really push delegation during that meeting, from attorneys down. And then, we also do a Trello board update, which is a Kanban board, on Friday afternoons. And so we kind of bookend the week with casework as well.

But it's kind of nice, too, because that has freed me up to be more of a manager and less of a lawyer, honestly. I get to touch base with each of my employees. I sent them all props today, "I recognize that you guys are doing a great job." I'm just sending one-on-one Slack messages to let them know, "Hey, I know this is a tough year so far, but we're going to push through and we're doing great."

We do annual retreats, where I fly everybody in to see us as well. I'll hire coaches to come out and coach our retreat. The biggest question that I get from new hires and new employees is, "How do I stay connected to my

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team if we're spread out like this?" And then I say, "Give it 30 days. You won't have that question anymore."

So it's been pretty nice to connect with everybody on a virtual platform and really do it well.

John: Yeah, that's great. Well, one other thing... and again, because I know something about your practice from having been a little bit under the hood, I also know... the other kind of Kanban/Agile principle that I know that you represent well is making policies explicit.

And so, as you talk about delegating and load balancing and covering for each other, part of the reason you're able to do that is that you've got this really good Goldilocks version of a lot of your 'how to's', right? Your policies on what it takes to do different parts of the work.

Justie: Yeah, I didn't mention this in the tech stack, but we use Tetra for our internal wiki. I will record Loom videos. My team will record Loom videos. We will record ourselves doing something. If we've had to teach it once, you know somebody else is going to have that same question. So just record it right away, and put it on Tetra with an explanation.

With AI now, it's super easy to generate me a transcript that I can edit. And so we generally try to systemize things. And one of the learning curves that I had to get over was we couldn't work in silos among the practice areas. Granted, I'm not going to take the most complex divorce case, but I know enough about divorce to step in if my family law attorney is out.

That's exactly what happened this week, right? My other associate jumped on random cases because we had to. We're not so big that we lose sight of that, right? And we all work in the same system. So regardless of type of law or type of client, we're still using the same mentality to do client service from start to finish.

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And treating everybody like a VIP, whether that's a court, a colleague, your staff, it doesn't really matter. They're the ones who make the world go round, honestly.

John: Okay. Well, I love all that and I could dive deep on all the policy stuff, but I actually want to hear a little bit more about your journey. Because, as you said, you're about 10 years into having your own practice. And I know that that practice has taken a few different forms over those 10 years, but take us back to your initial decision to launch your own practice.

And what was the impetus to you going out and saying, "Okay, I'm going to do this on my own"?

Justie: I'm a horrible employee. I don't take direction well from anyone, ever. No, that's a part of it. Honestly, that is one of our core values, is being an ambitious rebel. And some of that is... I've worked as a prosecutor. I've worked for the ACLU. And I do think our system and our justice system is decent; there's always room for improvement. You still find the bad apples when you're in here, and there are days when I just want to burn it all down and kind of start over.

But I think owning my own firm is the only place where I have that flexibility to actually do that. Where I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to iterate. I'm going to try something for a while. I'm going to see if it works. If it doesn't work, I'm going to scratch it and we're going to start all over."

It was really hard over the last 10 years to get to a point where I'm like, "That's not a failure." There are just 10,000 ways *not* to make a lightbulb if you're Thomas Edison.

So I'm like, "Okay, I have employees come and I have employees go. I have partners come and partners go. I've learned something from every single one of those relationships. And if it is just my firm that's going to be an incubator for amazing lawyers to learn how to be a lawyer without

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sacrificing their soul, and be a human first and then a lawyer, I will have succeeded.”

I’ve kind of changed my perspective, if you will, over the last 10 years, and it’s a lot more about time and quality and a lot less about quantity and money.

John: Yeah. Well, the money’s fine, right?

Justie: Yeah, I’ve got five attorneys and we’re still hiring. And it’s still okay. There’s always going to be ups and downs. But planning... Yeah, the money’s there. It’s not going to go anywhere. People are not going to stop breaking the law.

John: Right. Yes. Or having relationship issues, or any of the things, right? I mean, it’s one of the things I put out on LinkedIn or whatever, “There’s never been a better time in the history of lawyers to launch your own practice. There’s always going to be demand. The tools are really good.”

But it’s some of these things that you’ve learned along the way that I do think are some of the biggest challenges. Because part of it is you go from being a lawyer to being a business owner. And you had a little experience as a business owner before you launched your own practice, or did you launch your practice first?

Justie: Right around the same time. One of the reasons that I went out on my own and left the DA’s office was for family reasons. My father-in-law had Alzheimer’s really badly, and my mother-in-law wanted to retire and spend more time with him. So they owned a property management company, and I basically said, “I will help you and learn from you and be your associate broker for the property management for two years while we transition and you fully retire after that.”

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Of course, what I tend to do, being the absolute go-getter that you know that I am, when I say two years, it really was more like two months. So I put my goals down in writing, and I was like, "I'm going to do the real estate stuff." And by the time I was like, "Oh, okay, I can take this and run with it," I still missed being a lawyer, and it's only been a couple of months.

I had my decompressed time after being a DA, and it's time to start the law firm again. I went solo, and I went part time; I only worked three days a week. And I was okay, but the other family part of it is I want to have kids and I didn't want to work all the time.

And so my son is seven now, and I shut down my firm because I needed to run the property management side for several months when I had maternity. I thought it would be harder to come back from that, but I picked right back up where I was and I had three times as many cases. So when I think things are going to go badly, they never really do. And it's just staying the course, I think, a little bit, and riding through that up and down.

John: Well, and giving yourself permission to take the time and to embrace whatever season in your life you happen to be in. Because part of it, to me, is that you were experiencing a couple of different... It's the "sandwich generation" thing that we Gen Xers are dealing with.

Justie: Small kids and aging parents at the same time.

John: Yep.

Justie: Yep.

John: And not just Gen Xers, right? Every generation is going to hit that part in their lives, and it's not easy. It's very real.

Justie: Yeah. And I think it's hard, too, for lawyers to talk about it. So I've lived that example for a lot of my team, and I teach on for the state bar

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here. And I'm just like, "I've got no secrets." I'm not going to hide behind this perfectionist film and just rely on that and the prestige of being a lawyer to get myself clients. I'm real. You see what you get. And I've always been that way. So getting back to that was somewhat refreshing in the last couple of years as well.

John: Yeah, I can imagine. Well, and again, probably at the end of the day it's a benefit, in terms of getting the kinds of clients that you would want to work with.

Justie: Yeah, I mean, I definitely drop the F-bomb during intakes on a regular basis. And the clients are like, "Oh, sorry, I can't say that." And I'm like, "You're not going to offend me. You have no idea the stuff that I'm seeing. I could burn your ears off."

So, yeah, I can connect with clients really easy. I share personal stories on intakes, and I'm just a regular person. But I've found that being who I am, I think Mike Whelan said it, "Live yourself loudly," or "Be yourself loudly." I'm like, "Yeah, that resonates. I don't have any problems with that."

John: Well, I think that when people are experiencing these incredibly tough times in their life, they've been accused of a crime that they may or may not have done, or they're having relationship issues, and sometimes the whole soup, right?

Justie: Because it all goes hand in hand.

John: Yeah, it's not just one problem, right? They come cascading down. And for you, I assume that you're giving permission and encouraging your team to do this as well, to come and be human first and be supportive.

It's another one of the things that I know you and I have talked about, that I say out on the socials all the time, is that at its core, lawyering is a caregiving profession.

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Justie: Yep, it absolutely is. And I wish I would have taken more therapy, social work type classes. But, it's nice to have people around me... My entire team sees that and they all buy into it, too.

And so it's super nice when I'm like, "You guys, I've hit my absolute limit today. I can't handle one more person." It's usually opposing counsel or something goes wrong and it blows up. It's an adversarial system, I get it. But I'm like, "I can't handle it anymore. I'm going to go to the horses, and I'm going to send you guys pictures from the horses on our Slack channel."

And I'm requesting that everybody send me dog or cat or kid pictures as well, because we need the pick-me-up. And man, do they rally. We have had multiple days where we're like, "Oh, we need funny GIFs, right? This case went sideways on us. Please send us office space GIFs or whatever GIF."

John: I'm a GIF person.

Justie: I'm a GIF. Yeah, so everybody on the team rallies around that. But it takes a conscious effort to let new employees know it's okay to be human first. I expect pictures of your dog. I don't expect an invitation to your wedding or baby shower unless you would like to. I will come, but we are one step below family. And it's kind of nice to be able to support people like that.

John: Yeah, and it cuts against the conventional wisdom or at least the general perception of what it means to be a lawyer. And there's a funny... And I won't go on a whole... I've got a whole riff. I struggle with the term "professionalism" because I think it's such a complicated term. I think if you are in a room full of 100 lawyers and you say, "Yay, professionalism," you'll get 100 heads nodding for 100 different reasons. Right?

Because it's a word that's really hard to pin down. But I think that there are visions of, or versions of, professionalism that get sort of foisted upon new

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lawyers in particular. It's about being buttoned down and walling off your emotions and doing the job regardless of what's going on in your head or in your heart.

And I'm hearing from you that that is not necessarily the best way to run a law practice, or to engage in a law practice as a lawyer, as an owner, whoever.

Justie: Right. Yeah. I wholeheartedly agree with that. It was hard, especially being a trial lawyer, to a certain extent, that when you're in front of a jury, even in front of a judge on litigating motions and testimony, there is a performance aspect to it.

I do have a jury persona. It's not much different than my regular persona, which is I make fun of myself all the time. I probably make some inappropriate jokes. Jurors really like me, and I have them laughing during voir dire, even with the most horrific cases.

I find that a lot of times you either have to laugh when you make a mistake, and own up to it and fix it, or you're going to be huddled under your desk and crying. So there's not much room in between. And it has taken years to find that style before I was comfortable in my own skin.

Honestly, I think it's harder with women sometimes too, having supervised younger lawyers. I had female interns who would wear fake engagement rings during jury trials because they didn't want people to think that they were so young that they looked like they were in high school.

I mean, I don't know if I would do that, but if that's part of your style and that's part of the performance aspect and that's what you need to feel comfortable and secure, then okay, go for it. I'll support you any way that I can. I prefer much more just being myself and making stupid jokes, let's be honest.

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John: Yeah, I share that tendency.

Justie: So I can get along.

John: Yeah, for sure. Well, tell me a little bit more about your journey. Because I know that you've done a lot of reflection and did a lot of growth and learning, just in terms of how you approach the business of law and what you're trying to accomplish with your practice.

Justie: Yeah. After about I think my son was maybe five years old, I was working constantly. I have had two partners at that point. I was down to one partner. What I determined during that time was just, "I'm working too much. I'm losing sight of myself. I'm working for the wrong reasons."

I was listening to a lot of podcasts, and not necessarily self-help podcasts, but just podcasts like yours and a lot of lawyer podcasts and marketing podcasts while I drove to and from court. And I was like, "You know what? I am spending so much time in court that I can't be a good boss. I can't be a good trainer. I can't do the business side of things the way I'd like to because it takes too much time. I'm trying to be both lawyer and owner, and there's only so much time in the day."

I hit a wall and was just like, "I can't keep doing this." At one point I stepped back and had a heart to heart with my husband. I was like, "Okay, I either need you to support me more in my career, or I need to take a step back so I can support you in your career. But both of us just going all out all the time with a child at home, two dogs, two horses, a whole household to run, it's too much. I just can't keep doing it at this pace."

And I think that was probably one of the first times that we consulted with you. Because that was the capacity reckoning and everything, and kanban...

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I ended up in the hospital and went, “Okay, I can't do this this way anymore. There are certain things that have to change, one of which is how I want to build my firm. I don't want to build it on the backs of other people. I want to work as a team. I want to take those team sports things where we're talking about captains and co-captains and best supporting player and all that and really work it into a law firm.”

And what was crazy, what I discovered about myself during that time did not necessarily mesh with the other partner that I still had. We were in different places in our lives and we had different priorities.

John: I think that's right. From my recollection from that time as well, you had sort of different... Well, I think very different extents to which you bought into some of the conventional wisdom around running a law practice. It's not a good or a bad either way, but you have your approach around team. And, as you said, not quite family, but on that spectrum.

And when that's your approach, and you're talking about culture, and you're talking about subjective capacity and all the rest, there's not room for intense conversations around utilization rate. That's sort of these conventional metrics that have been pushed by the ABA for 50+ years now.

Justie: Yeah, even Clio with the lockup rate and stuff. I'm like, that's not even on my top ten list of KPIs that I need to track.

John: Right. Yeah. I love the Clio folks, but their impression of the KPIs of the number of things that you're supposed to be keeping track of, I find absolutely ludicrous.

Justie: Yeah. I mean, I have my core ones, don't get me wrong. My undergrad is in accounting, so I still pull those numbers and I ride my bookkeeper about the budget and everything. But when it comes down to it, it's people over profit, first. And I will sacrifice my profit if I can make one of my teammates lives better.

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So it was a trade off a little bit. I mean, even the book *Profit First*, right? Traditional law firm management and the way cash flows work, you've got to put your money where your mouth is. What is most important to you? And a lot of law firms are run on the whole, "We're here to make money."

And I'm like, "I want more time. I don't want more money. I have enough money. I'm happy with where I'm at." And honestly, that was really hard for me. It's only taken this last year, where I've sat down and looked at my life and went, "Oh, I don't need to run a law firm with these same profit percentages that lawyers or whoever suggests. I'm okay here."

And I know that my cost of salaries and employees is going to be much higher than the recommended rate, but I'll also do things like a quarterly wellness initiative where I'll send a book to everybody on my team. I will send...

We have a MasterClass login for the team for learning, because some of our individual core values are all about learning. We have a Headspace login. I've got a new EAP provider. We do a gym membership. I mean, there are things that we do for wellness that take money directly out of my pocket and can impact the bottom line.

But ultimately, I'm okay with that.

John: And I think part of it depends on what time horizon you're talking about. So, sure. Yeah, it impacts your bottom line on a quarterly or half yearly basis, or maybe even on an annual basis. But over the course of the life cycle of your law practice and your law firm, I mean, you tell me.

But my guess is what you're finding is that the lack of burnout, the increased loyalty, the existence of balance, the ability to have a family that you actually spend time with and nurture and enjoy, and all the rest. Right? That's going to lead to good long-term success, even if it feels like, "Oh, my

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margin isn't quite within the narrow bounds of what the books or the gurus or whoever says it should be.”

Justie: Right. And I think it's just being comfortable, as an owner, taking the long view. Because lawyers, we don't do that well I have noticed.

John: Ironically almost, but yes.

Justie: Yeah. We're like, “All right, done with one trial, on to the next one.” Maybe it's a litigation thing and less of a transactional lawyer. But we will push ourselves through five-day trial after five-day trial and just keep going and going, thinking it will make things better in the long run.

Ultimately, what I found, and what my team has found, is they don't want me to be in court. The entire team says we want you at your desk to support us and to work on systems, design, marketing and do the intakes. And that's ultimately where I have pulled back.

I'm no longer doing as many trials. I've told a couple of judges I'm not taking trials anymore. And they're like, “What?” And I was like, “No, no, it's fine. We'll still take the case, but I'll be here as a trainer for my associates and I'll sit second chair.”

John: And despite the fact that you're really good at it.

Justie: Yeah. I can't remember the last time I lost a trial. It's been a while.

John: Yeah. I will forgive you if you're not keeping up with my podcast, which is totally understandable, but the last few episodes I've been talking about things like having slack and making sure that you're not so highly utilized that when something comes up, like your family law lawyer is out sick and all of a sudden there are things to cover...

Part of what I'm hearing is, by you not having the commitment to be the primary responsible attorney on these litigation trial matters, that that is a

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form of slack within your overall business. Because if you're needed, if you have to step up to the plate, you can get there and you've got the skills and the experience to go do that. But on the long term and, as a day to day, you know that you're better off training and teaching and supporting and doing that thing.

I've talked about, and I'm sure we've talked about, where when you own the business, the best and highest use is "roadblock remover in chief". Making sure that you're out there. You're the snowplow, and just making sure that everybody else has what they need, whether it's the technology, whether it's the policies and procedures, whether it's the one-on-one training, whether it's the shot in the arm and the moral support.

Justie: Right. And it's an evolution. I think there are growing pains when you go from one, a solo, to your first employee. If you're going from solo to receptionist/paralegal/legal clerk, that's a growing pain.

And then I felt it again when we hit five employees and went up to six or so, and then the 10. I think once you've hit five employees, you can go up to 10 pretty easy, above 10. I love all of my team, but I like that 10 employees sweet spot. I'm like a 10-15 type person. That gives me the ability to take fewer cases and be there for my team, and still be able to check in with everyone on a weekly basis. Yeah, I could grow.

I've had a lot of employees over the time that we've known each other, John. And Covid was like... We tripled, because we were literally one of the only law firms that stayed open. We've been virtual since 2015. So, of course, we were going to have more virtual clients. But what has happened since Covid, things have settled back down.

We're probably on the same growth term trajectory that we would have been had Covid not hit. And we've normalized now. But riding those waves... I mean, nobody could have predicted a pandemic. But I mean,

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being in a position to capitalize on it and then learning from it, I mean, there have been so many lessons over the years.

And yeah, I think me having capacity to support my team and checking in with everyone individually, that's kind of where I'm at right now.

Next step we've got going in the future, my right-hand woman is going to be our COO. She's a non-attorney. She's taking over training non-attorney staff and I'm training attorney staff. And then we work together. We did an offsite in Charleston this year and set up her goals for the next year. Just her and I, which was kind of awesome. We also did a haunted cemetery tour, which she was not a fan of. It was dark. She's fine. Everybody's happy. But the firm loved those videos.

John: Well, again, it's an experiment, right? You're doing things in culture and not every team outing is going to check all the boxes for every member of the team, and that's okay.

Just reflecting back, the size of your team at 10, I think that always calls to mind the Amazon two-pizza team rule. The geekier thing that the Agile folks talk about is that the ideal team size is seven plus or minus five, which is funny. Basically what that means is once you get over 12, you really you can't be a single team anymore. You've got to find a different way to structure it.

And the closer you get to those outer limits or lower limits, then the more complicated it gets, and so you need to start laying the groundwork. And it sounds to me, at least in this division of roles where you've now got an operations person dealing with the non-lawyer work, if you do decide to grow bigger, you then will have something of a leadership structure that gives you that ability.

But now you get to decide, right? And even the team, I think, probably has some input in terms of 'how do we want to be?'

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Justie: That was the first subject for our team retreat last year, in September. What is our number one goal? And they're like, "Hiring a full-time receptionist," and what that looked like. And I was like, "Guys, I don't know if we have the revenue to do this." And the entire team was like, "No, you don't understand, we don't want raises. We want you to hire this person and we'll help you go find them."

And so my entire team sat in on interviews. We went through a couple of candidates, but we found our rock star now. So it's less than a year before you can pull that lever. And really, come back in a year. Do a retrospective and be like, "Did this work? Do you all agree? I bet you want raises now."

But I mean, you set yourself up for success in the long term. It's all about the long game.

John: Yep. Again, I will call out because you just used a buzzword. You're doing retrospectives, right? You're actually taking time on a regular, periodic basis to say, "Okay, let's talk about on the business." Well, I mean, more than that. You're doing this on a weekly basis. Even just putting the case law aside and saying, "Okay, how are we doing personally? How are we doing as a team? How are we doing as a business?"

Justie: Well, what's funny is we're coming up on our annual retreat. I pulled all of our notes from last year, so they're sitting right here on my desk to keep on top of mind. And it's like I had everybody map their ideal job and what they spent their time on. It is super entertaining to go back a year later and see what they liked, what they didn't like.

They had to rank things, and did I do a good job getting that off their plate if it wasn't something that filled their bucket. So far, I think I did pretty good.

John: Oh, I love it. So if you were to give advice, and I'm going to give you a very abstract person to give advice to, but let's say someone that is running their own practice, maybe by themselves, maybe with a partner or

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two, but they're just at that wits end. They're pulling their hair out. They're on the hamster wheel, right? They're doing that thing that could land them in the hospital, right? Whatever it happens to be, what would your advice to them be?

Justie: The hardest thing to do. Which is stop, take a break, and walk away from the computer, walk away from the screen. Maybe spend a long weekend just figuring out what you want personally and what you're set up to achieve. What are your goals? Is it to build the best law firm for criminal defense in the entire state of Colorado? Or is it to build a great place to work?

And give your employees flexibility, a great culture, and support to you and your teammates. They don't have to be mutually exclusive.

John: Of course not.

Justie: But I think if you know what you're comfortable with... For me, it was unlocking. I need more time with my son while he's young, more time with my horses, more time with my husband. I want to spend some time hiking outside. I can't get that in a courtroom.

John: Yeah, well, you live in a beautiful part of the world.

Justie: I do. Yes. Outside of Colorado. I'm looking at the Front Range right now, Boulder Flatirons outside my window. But it is hard to do that if you're in court all the time where courtrooms don't have windows. And so I had to get my firm in line with my individual priorities, and figure out my individual core values before I figured out how the business could support that.

And when I hire people, it's the same sort of thing as my team has grown. What are their individual core values? How does this firm support those core values? And can the firm support their individual achievements and goals? And that works for you as well as your team.

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John: Yeah, and part of it for me, and I've long said that I find one of the saddest businesses in our industry is the "Leave Law Behind." I get it. I know why they exist. I understand that they're solving very real problems for people that are burned out on the legal career.

But I just believe that you don't have to leave law behind to get a life. You can have a life in the law. You and I share this access to Justice Bend as well, and I think that's part of why we do a lot of what we do. Every lawyer lost to burnout, to career dissatisfaction, to all the things is another like blow to the access to justice gap.

Because we don't have enough lawyers as it is helping people. And the more people... Even if they're in big corporate law firms, that's great, they're holding on to that job. Which means that someone who is doing people law work isn't going to maybe be tempted to go do that big law thing, right? Trading a lot of time for a lot of money.

Justie: Not going to lie. There are still days when I'm like, "Why am I doing this to myself?" But they're fewer and farther between than they ever have been before. And I think if I can say that at year 10, when 75% of new businesses and entrepreneurial endeavors... When they start to fail at year 10... It's like 75% of businesses fail.

And I'm like, "Am I going to be that, or am I going to push on through and potentially make this better for other lawyers?" And do I expect that all my associates are going to stay with me for the entirety of their legal career? No, I don't. And I think it's unreasonable to expect that. But if I can give them good habits now, or show them what they've learned in the past, in other firms, that doesn't have to be that way. You don't have to have a 2,500-hour billable hour requirement. You can do this as a flat fee, alternative fee.

If they want to try something new and get creative, I'll support that 100%. But yeah, leaving the practice of law, has it crossed my mind? Yes. Has it

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seriously crossed my mind in many years? No, I've been fighting for this tooth and nail. And yeah, so far, it's been a good ride.

John: Good. Well, Justie, thank you so much for coming on to my podcast and telling your story and sharing your wisdom and experience and the bumps in the road and all of it.

Justie: Yeah. And I think if I had to put something down as to one good resource to... There was a book that I read recently that really unlocked some things too. It's called *Give and Take*; it's about givers and takers. And surrounding myself with other people who are also givers was very instrumental in success, so finding ways to continue to give back. I'm happy to come on your podcast anytime, John.

John: Yeah. I will find that book, and I'll put it in the show notes for people to look it up. But again, yeah, so great talking with you. Enjoy the rest of your summer.

Justie: Yeah. I'm done after this, and I'm going to head outside and see the horses before it rains.

John: Perfect. Okay. Well, thanks again.

Justie: Of course. Thank you for having me.

Thanks for listening to *The Agile Attorney* podcast. I'm your host, John Grant. If you found today's episode interesting or useful, please share it with someone who you think would benefit from a more agile approach to their legal practice. If you have any questions, feedback or maybe a topic you'd like to hear me cover, you can reach me at John.Grant@agileattorney.com.

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That’s it for today’s episode. Thank you for listening, and see you next time.