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**POWER PLAYERS** > People in the know who you ought to know

## Team Builder

Navy Captain turned attorney Jim Patterson argues teamwork is a crucial key to success

BY JOE DELMONT



James Patterson (center) fosters a sense of teamwork, even while running during lunchtime with a team of exercise enthusiasts.

photo by Tate Carlson

Jim Patterson followed in his father's footsteps by enrolling in the U.S. Naval Academy. During his time there, Patterson says he learned one lesson he will never forget: Organizational success comes from building a culture of teamwork. It's a

lesson he has come to integrate into the operation of the successful Minneapolis law firm he founded in 1991: Patterson Thuente, Skaar & Christensen.

Teamwork is an important part of the equation that's continually nurtured and

emphasized from top to bottom at the 70-person firm. "Keeping a culture alive is like taking out the trash," says the down-to-earth Patterson. "You have to do it every day or it gets away from you."

Working with attorneys, Patterson admits,

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is like working with four-star admirals. “You want them to be independent, but you want them to work together, too. That’s the real management challenge.” Teamwork and respect is expected from everyone at the intellectual property firm, from partners down to the newest student clerk. “We won’t tolerate having attorneys push around the support staff,” says Patterson. “They are equal members of the team, and they will be treated with respect, and they are.”

The strong team approach benefits the firm’s clients, as well. “The client’s needs are primary,” says Patterson. “Attorneys often talk about ‘My this’ and ‘My that.’ For our clients, we put together the best team of lawyers, regardless of who brought in the account or who wants to work on it. To do this, you have to have an atmosphere of support and trust between lawyers and between lawyers and staff.”

Patterson’s biggest strength is also his greatest weakness. “By nature,” he says, “I expect the best of people, and perhaps I give

**POWER PLAYER:  
James H. Patterson**

**Title:** Founder and shareholder, Patterson, Thuente, Skaar & Christensen, PA. ■ **Age:** 56 ■ **Hometown:** White Bear Lake ■ **Current Residence:** Minneapolis ■

**Education:** B.S. Electrical Engineering, U.S. Naval Academy; J.D., University of Kansas.

■ **Directorships/Trusteeships:** Past chairman and active leader for the Volunteer Lawyers Network ■ **Family:** Married, four children (two daughters, two sons)

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them the benefit of the doubt longer than I should. But that comes with experience.”

Chat with the avid runner and he’ll talk about the law. But he doesn’t emphasize the firm or his legal triumphs over a career of nearly three decades. He talks about giving back and about providing “access to justice,”

helping the disadvantaged by providing them with free legal services. He’s been practicing pro bono for the Hennepin County Bar Association for almost 20 years.

“In many of these cases,” notes Patterson, “you put in thousands of dollars of time, much more than the claim is often worth. And even if they don’t win, the client is satisfied because they’ve been heard. That’s the whole basis of our system—to go and have an impartial person hear your complaint.” The system works, he says, because people know they can be heard. “That’s a huge benefit to the community in a city as large as this is,” he says, “where we have a large number of people who feel they haven’t been heard.”

And just as Jim followed his Dad through the Navy, his son John and James did too. And like their Dad, neither is old enough to rent a car, but one is driving a destroyer and the other is flying airplanes. ☎

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**Joe Delmont** is an award-winning business writer and editor based in St. Paul.



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