

Managing

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Resolve to Become A Better Supervisor

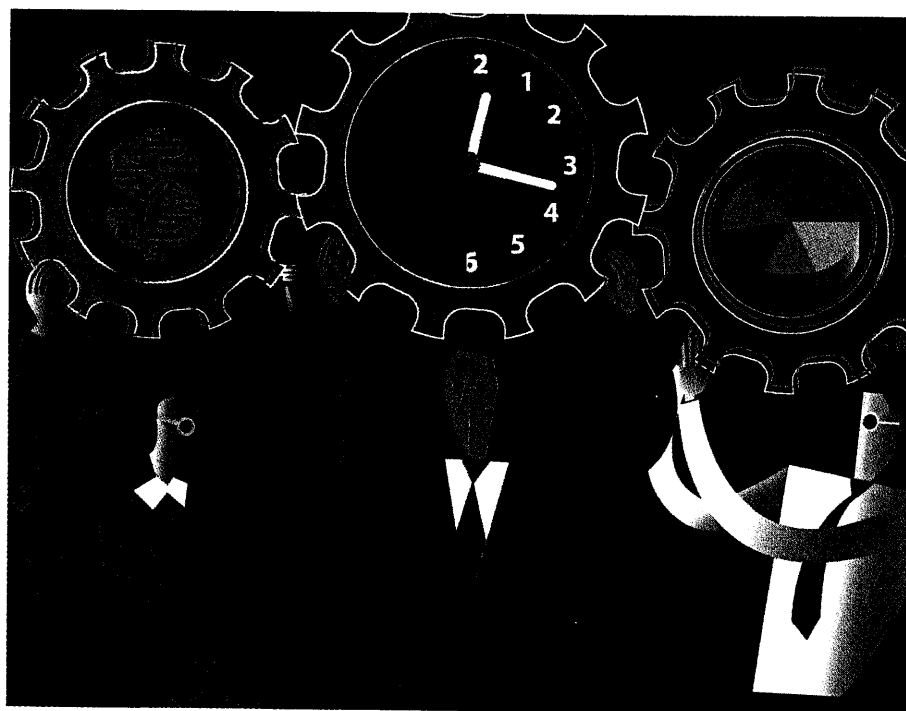
Among your New Year's resolutions, you've decided that your top priority is to become a better supervisor. You know that at the heart of any law firm is its people, and that the product of any law firm is its intellectual capital. You know that enhancing your supervisory skills is more than a desire—it is a necessity. You seek to use the talents of your support and professional staff wisely, to create a learning and motivating work environment and, thereby, to increase productivity and your firm's success.

An effective supervisor has three areas of well-honed management skills: time, people and process. As you consider your New Year's resolution, think about which of these areas is your greatest strength and which most needs improvement.

Time Management: Be Proactive

Ask any lawyer, paralegal or secretary working under a person with poor time management skills, and they will tell you that doing so is agony. These supervisors often wait until the last minute to give an assignment, causing an emergency where one did not—and need not—exist. These same supervisors give assignments with unreasonable deadlines because they don't really understand the amount of time a specific project will take.

Supervisors without time management skills have not defined their pri-



orities and are in a reactive instead of *proactive* mode. All too often, as a result, the client who screams the loudest is the one who gets the attention, rather than the client who is most in need.

Lawyers with good time management skills have these abilities and traits:

- A clear sense of their priorities
- An awareness of how long a particular project will take
- An ability to plan ahead so there are no self-inflicted emergencies
- An understanding of the workload to be accomplished and the human power available to handle it
- A conviction that there is a time for everything, including life outside of the office

People Management: Listen Up and Get to Know the Team

The most important skill in effective people management is communication, which consists of talking and listening. Frankly, though, the listening part is the most important when it comes to management.

Assess your listening skills by answering these questions:

- When someone speaks to you, do you hear only bits and pieces because you're not focusing on the conversation?
- Do you hear every word that is being said but fail to take in the full meaning?
- Or, are you an empathetic listener, one who hears not just the spoken words but also understands the meaning and emotion behind the words?

Empathetic listening increases your effectiveness, as well as the effectiveness of those around you. It is also central to high morale and group motivation.

Another central factor in good people management is getting to know the members of your group. Effective supervisors are able to do the following:

- They learn the strengths and weaknesses of each member of the group, looking for ways to use each individual's talents, while also providing each with opportunities to develop more fully.

- They understand that good employees stay with their present employer because the environment is healthy, the work is challenging, co-workers are friendly and cooperative, the salary and benefits are reasonable, and there is opportunity for advancement and increased responsibility.

- They recognize that creating a positive work environment that includes managing people well greatly decreases turnover (and that turnover is not only costly in terms of the dollars involved, it also reduces morale, client service and productivity).

While recognizing the individual talents of the group members, effective supervisors also view the group as a team. They encourage cooperation among team members, knowing that a team of even two can accomplish more than several individuals acting alone. The successful people manager is a role model for team behavior.

Process Management: See the Links

The resourceful supervisor creates, and fine-tunes, the processes that contribute to the team's success. These processes include:

- Recruitment
- Assignment distribution
- Professional development

■ Performance reviews

When run effectively, the processes intertwine with one another. For instance, take a close look at the factors that contribute to success in the different roles on your team: What makes a legal secretary effective on your team? What factors lead associates to perform well in their positions? Determining these characteristics for the different positions in your group can be enormously helpful in several areas:

- Identifying hiring criteria for recruitment
- Developing evaluation factors for performance reviews
- Specifying curricula for professional development needs
- Setting standards for assigning and critiquing new work

Too frequently, these processes are looked at individually, instead of in tandem. Tying them together, however, will do more than help you save time. It will also allow you to easily and effectively communicate to your whole team about how decisions are made regarding hiring, work distribution, evaluations and advancement opportunities.

Those communications will lead to clear expectations, which are paramount to helping individuals succeed in their jobs and, therefore, contribute to the overall success of the team.

Start the Year Right— Taking Action

Supervisory skills are learned, honed and mastered. They are areas in which all of us have the ability to improve. To get started, take a look at the Action Plan checklist at right.

Remember, the effort is worth it—the result is a happier, more productive and successful team. It may even give you more time to work on your other resolutions for the New Year! ■

Action Plan

Take a few moments to read back through this column. Grade yourself as a supervisor in each of the three areas—time management, people management and process management.

- Are there areas in which you have particular strengths?
- How might you build on those strengths to further hone your supervisory style?
- Are there areas in which you need improvement?
- What improvements are called for, and how would you prioritize them?
- Is there an individual who can serve as a mentor to you as you strive to improve?
- What CLE courses or workshops could be helpful?
- What written resources are available to help you develop the skills you've identified? Here are three great books you can start with:

The Lost Art of Listening by Michael Nichols. Guilford Press, 1996 reissue.

Practice What You Preach: What Managers Must Do to Create a High Achievement Culture by David H. Maister. The Free Press, 2001.

Principle-Centered Leadership by Stephen R. Covey. Simon & Schuster, 1992.



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