

Published in *Law Practice Management*, April 1998.

BASIC MANAGEMENT SKILLS FOR PARTNERS

By

Susan G. Manch

BASIC MANAGEMENT SKILLS FOR PARTNERS

Just when partners thought they had gotten past the hurdles of **being** an associate--learning to please partners and clients, honing their legal talent, and finding their place in the firm--they find themselves in the position of having to **manage** associates. Suddenly, they are responsible for helping junior attorneys navigate the shoals of private practice just as they did on their way to partnership. While the importance of the supervisory role is recognized by the firm and those who are doing the managing, there is usually no one

instructing partners on **how** to manage associates. However, it is a clear expectation that they will impart knowledge, give feedback, delegate assignments, and assist in the development of associate legal talent--all of which require good management ability.

While we are consulting with law firms on the design of attorney evaluation systems, we have been presented with a unique opportunity to view the firm through the looking glass so to speak. Evaluation results, viewed as a whole, can act as a mirror--reflecting patterns of developmental deficiencies that may suggest a source. Frequently the source may be the management style employed by a supervisor.

In corporate America they make a science of management, always coming up with new ways to approach the management function such as "Management By Objectives," "Total Quality Management," "Partnering," or developing "Learning Organizations." In law firms, however, each partner is left to devise his or her own system of management, determining the appropriate level of depth and scope. Unfortunately, the management function gets lost in the rush of everyday business. Additionally, since most associates work for more than one partner, associates are exposed to disparate management philosophies. Not only is there no agreed upon management philosophy and standard at each law firm but also there is no reward system that encourages partners to be effective managers. When associates exhibit performance problems, it is difficult for partners to determine how or if they should try to assist the associate in overcoming the problem.

Yet this recognition of and attention to developmental deficiencies at an early stage can make all the difference in the course of an associate's career.

As all law firms compete for the cream of the dwindling pool of legal talent who choose private practice as a

career, employing good management practices can make the difference in retaining those attorneys who can make a contribution to the firm or losing them to a firm with a reputation for good management. Associates who are well-managed have self-confidence and work well independently; they ask questions, listen to feedback and communicate concerns; they produce a superior work product--the first time; they feel at home in the firm and want to contribute to its profitability; and they feel satisfied and fulfilled in their careers.

How can law firms achieve the goal of well-trained managers shepharding developing legal talent toward success in the firm?

Effective management involves a few basic skills. The most crucial for most supervisors are those surrounding communications such as:

THE ABILITY TO DESCRIBE WORK ASSIGNMENTS

THE ABILITY TO LISTEN

THE ABILITY TO GIVE FEEDBACK

The Ability to Describe Work Assignments--While this sounds very basic, it is surprising how seldom it happens. While we are working with attorneys on evaluation issues, we have noticed that poor

communication within the assignment process is the core of most associate complaints about supervisory style.

Imagine this scenario:

At evaluation time, Susan Sands (partner) sees a pattern emerge as she reviews her notes on the associates who have worked for her over the past six months. An inordinate number of them seem to need constant clarification on assignments and bother her with questions--many of which she sees as unnecessary. Her team's progress on matters has been slowed by these interruptions. She mentions to several partners in her department that this generation of associates seems to need an excessive amount of clarification. Most of the other partners express surprise because they feel that five out of six associates in their group are among the firm's superstars. Susan has a reputation among associates for being brief in the extreme when describing assignments, and she rarely divulges any information on the client unless it is absolutely necessary.

Poor work is often the result of the failure to communicate standards and clear parameters for the project. Without a vertical management structure, most associates are left without a "boss" to describe what performance standards will be applied to their work. Associates rarely know much about the client's needs that generate their work. They work on discreet issues without seeing the big picture that often would bring understanding. Most people function better when they can see how their efforts fit in to the scheme of things.

It can be frustrating for associates to feel that "figuring out" the partner's wishes or the firm's policies is another "test" they must pass on the way to partnership. Some thoughts on incorporating positive information-sharing are as follows:

- . *Articulate firm-wide criteria for good work*

- . *Communicate personal hot buttons (e.g. "I really hate split infinitives" or "When I say I need it by 3:00, I mean 2:00 not 2:59)*

- . *Be consistent in expectations and be willing to ask questions to make sure the message was received*

- . *Give clear directions--context, client expectations, product expected, how much time the assignment merits, priority among other assignments, deadline, and resources*

The Ability to Listen--There is a constant barrage of information coming in and going out at a rate faster than anyone can accommodate. In the management process, taking the time to truly listen to an associate's questions and comments can make the difference between receiving a good first draft or receiving a poorly conceived, badly constructed first draft. Because the work is familiar territory to the supervisor, the partner might assume that issues are self-explanatory and treat questions and comments as intrusions on an already full schedule. It is key, however, to stop and listen to an associate's questions because they alert supervisors to errors in instruction, to the associate's place on the learning curve, and to potential new angles on the issue at hand. Some suggestions for enhancing listening skills are as follows:

- . *Make it clear that questions and comments are welcome and appreciated*

- . *Open up to more than just the words--pay attention to body language and the intensity of any communicative effort*

- . *Really get to know the associates--learn something about their personal style and values to help put communication in context*

Frank Holmes, a fifth year rising star in the litigation group, suddenly starts having problems meeting deadlines. He does not seem to be around as much as he used to be and when he is, his mind does not appear to be on his work. Sometimes he seems to want to say something when he is with Jose Alvarez, the practice group leader, but he stops short. Jose finally sits down to ask him about the change in his performance. In their conversation, Jose learns that Frank's mother has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and has begun exhibiting symptoms. Frank's father died many years ago and his mother moved in with his family this past year. He has been trying to take care of her and handle a full workload. He knows that he cannot continue this way, but he didn't know if he should bother Jose with his personal problems.

The Ability to Give Feedback--At one time or another, most of us have worked hard on something only to find out after investing time and brainpower that it was not what the client (or our spouse, or our child, or the managing partner, etc.) wanted. The key problem was lack of feedback while on an on-going basis as opposed to as an afterthought.

Imagine this scenario:

John Ames is sitting in his office when a call comes in from a Kim, a colleague at another prestigious law firm in town. John and Kim have always been polite competitors, so Kim thought it only fair to let John know that he had interviewed and was making an offer to John's star litigator, fourth year associate Sharon Fine. John is shocked--he had no idea that Sharon was unhappy. She has always been way ahead of the pack, and her work invites little or no supervision. In thinking back to her last evaluation, he distinctly remembers telling her "you're doing just fine." When John confronts her about why she is leaving, Sharon tells him that she felt unappreciated and unrecognized for her contributions. John's feedback to Sharon had been perceived by her to mean "you are nothing special."

Associates want and need feedback on how they are doing. They want to know what they have done well, whether they have met expectations, if they are on track, and what they must do to improve. Most law firms have some venue for formal evaluative feedback on an annual or biennial basis, but sometimes the most valuable feedback is the informal on-going communication that occurs while the work is in progress. Informal feedback can play an important role in the management relationship. Some of the hallmarks of effective, on-going informal communication are:

- . *To communicate expectations, values, and keys to success on a regular basis and in a variety of situations*

- . *To create a stronger relationship with the person being supervised by offering confidence-building positive encouragement along the way*
- . *To develop strengths, identify weaknesses, and set developmental priorities by addressing concerns before they become serious and by praising work that will serve as a guideline for future efforts.*

Through the looking glass of associate evaluation results, firms have a perspective of their supervisory styles and issues. Law firms can put their evaluative system to work for them in helping to point out problems before they become career-threatening for associates. Many developmental problems identified can be addressed through the positive application of good management skills. The first management skill to be applied could be developing effective communication skills. There are any number of basic techniques that will improve these skills. The time and effort will be well spent as effective management of associates can yield great results in morale, work product, and attorney retention.

Susan G. Manch is a management consultant with the firm of White Svihart & Associates in Washington, D.C. The firm specializes in addressing attorney personnel management issues for legal employers throughout the country.