

## How Managing Partners Can Support Law Firm Administrators

By Gerry Riskin



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Managing partners hope that administrators will cause fee earners to do the following:

- show enough self-discipline to record their time daily;
- optimize the use of the firm's IT systems;
- cooperate with their practice group, industry group and/or client team leaders to perform at peak, satisfying clients and generating new business.

Managing partners hope that administrators will cause marketing professionals at their firm to:

- arrange for appropriate groups and individuals within the firm to create effective business development plans that are meaningful and achievable; and
- ensure that the fee earners execute those plans resulting in significant fee generation to the firm.

Most managing partners are busy with their own practices, trying to get a consensus among the partners regarding the strategy of the firm, and possibly worrying about ways to combat stagnant or falling profits in an increasingly competitive market. The managing partner may also be looking at merger or acquisition suggestions and perhaps lateral hires.

The administrative team wants to please the managing partner and achieve all of her/his objectives. However, there are some challenges:

- Busy fee earners often fail to respond to requests for information;
- Senior fee earners interfere with scheduled meetings for their associates and staff relating to IT training or business development because they feel that their current matter would be disadvantaged by permitting a member of their team to be AWOL during a significant step;
- Senior fee earners often disregard requests (and sessions to which they are invited) sometimes because they are too busy and sometimes because they are not convinced that the purpose of the sessions to which they have been invited have sufficient value for them;
- Many fee earners rationalize that client work is far more important than the activities anticipated in the business development plans and therefore simply do not engage in the anticipated activities.

The list goes on but you get the idea.

Many administrative teams have the experience and training to manage effectively but are powerless to do so because they do

not have the support of the managing partner for their initiatives.

In most cases, the failure of the managing partner to support the initiatives of the administrative team is more *inadvertent* than *intentional*, and perhaps a consequence of the typical law firm structure and behavioral patterns.

So how can the managing partner better support the Legal Administrator (and administrative team)?

**Strategically Align with the Administrative Team:** Just as parents should never disagree in front of their children, the managing partner and the administrative team need to resolve issues and challenges privately. They should engage in robust debate just as Jim Collins prescribes in the best selling business book in history, *Good to Great*. The purpose of that rigorous debate is to come to a resolution which is then brought back to the firm as a team. If rank-and-file members of the firm see that they can divide and conquer the managing partner and the administrative team because the managing partner will not stand behind that team, the frequency of undesirable behavior will skyrocket.

**Confront Problem Behavior:** The managing partner has to be willing to diplomatically confront the senior partner who would not permit the associate to attend the training. There is nothing less pleasant nor anything the managing partner is less eager to do than confront problem behavior on the part of senior lawyers. However, the failure to do so is tantamount to sabotaging the efforts of the legal administrator. Exchanges between the managing partner and the partner exhibiting less than desirable behavior need not be catastrophic or extreme. With some training, the managing partner can learn to deal with situations of that nature with some level of comfort. Having been a managing partner myself, I understand better than most why we might be reluctant to have the confrontation. The binary choice is to learn to deal with it or undermine the legal administrator, whether intentionally or not. At the very least, if the managing partner will not confront the behavior, then some slack has to be given to the administrative team for not accomplishing some of the objectives of the managing partner, as outlined above.

**Apply Consistency in the Subjective Components of Compensation:** The subjective elements in compensation must be transparently utilized to reward those who support the administrative functions and offer disincentives to those who do not. The extreme “eat what you kill” law firms are basically hotels for lawyers and there is little leverage to obtain good citizenship from the occupants. Where a firm has a more evolved compensation system that includes subjective factors, discretion must be exercised with discipline in terms of how the individual accommodates and respects the internal policies, systems and protocols of the firm.

**The Legal Administrator’s Responsibility:** The greater power resides in the managing partner and therefore, in my estimation, so does the greater responsibility. Having said that, I believe it is incumbent upon the legal administrator, in her or his own way, to confront the managing partner in a manner analogous to the way the managing partner should confront the problem partners. I think often the challenges I have described go on for so long that everyone in the firm becomes slightly numb to them. People stop noticing or at least simply accept them on the basis that “This is simply the way things are in a law firm.” I don’t think that has to be the case. I think it is not only fair but is a responsibility of the legal administrator to address these issues with the managing partner. The message for the managing partner is that it is not an overt act of going over the administrator’s head that is the problem... it is the absence of support which creates the same result. The bottom line is that if a partner knows that they don’t have to do what the administrator’s team asks and there will be no consequences, then continuing to evaluate the administrative team on the basis of results simply makes no sense. The polite interpretation of the message therefore is “support me or moderate your expectations.” At the highest altitude, the legal administrator can offer constructive support and suggestions to the managing partner as to how she/he can help the firm achieve its desired outcomes.

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