

## Support for the Managing Partner: An Effective Administration

How does one begin to describe the difference between corporate management and law firm management? In many ways it's hard to describe to someone who hasn't experienced both. A corporate environment typically has one leader. That individual has enormous influence on the company culture, directs how the company will grow and how money will be spent. If you look at an organizational chart of the company it would be pyramidal. Compare that to a law firm. A better description is --- there is no comparison! Although a law firm has a managing partner or a president, there is usually more than one attorney with the same level of authority. Rainmakers always have a lot to say about what will or will not happen in a law firm. From my experience, the managing partner must be a consensus builder. He or she may have goals for the firm, but without the support of those attorneys deemed to have power within the firm, the ideas may go nowhere. The most effective managing partners also must maintain their individual practices and bring in their revenue share. This usually means long hours attending to client and firm matters. Most managing partners would agree that they spend a lot more time on firm matters than they anticipated when they accepted the role.

So where does the firm administration fit? How does the firm administration support the managing partner? That depends on the firm size and its culture. In many firms, administration is seen as overhead. This is unfortunate because the appropriate administration can be an important asset to the firm and can reduce the managing partner's stress.

I find that many law firms don't know what to expect from their administration. Many firms operate on the premise that "if it ain't broke, don't fix it". Law firms resist change. The corporate world today is very accustomed to change. They may not like it, but have come to accept it. Evaluating your administration based on solid information, can be the difference between an administration that significantly adds to your firm's success or merely functions as a reporting mechanism. It's important to ask yourself how you contribute to the expectations and behavior. Do you value your key administration members' opinions and seek them often? Or is your administration there just to make sure that the office gets cleaned, staff is relatively happy and the client invoices get produced and mailed?

Successful law firm management includes a strong managing partner and administration where both are respected for their contribution --- by each other and the firm in general. Having this happen doesn't have to be a quirk of fate. With a systematic review of current job responsibilities, all tasks, and firm goals, an administration can be developed that achieves this objective.

How long has it been since you evaluated the structure of your administration to determine how job functions have changed over the years? Could you be doing more with technology or are you captive to someone in administration who likes "the way we've always done it"? Is such an individual really contributing to your firm or detracting from it? Have you thought about how this attitude is affecting everyone? Not to mention your profitability.

If you've answered "yes" to any of the above questions, it may be time to review your structure and focus on building an administrative team that not only supports the managing partner, but also has the respect of the firm because they are valuable contributors to the firm.

Before you start the evaluation, you must communicate what you are doing and why to all of the firm members. If they hear it from you, it will be fact and not office gossip.

The first question to ask is "What are your plans for firm growth"? What is the firm currently doing to reach those goals? Will you be expanding practice areas or contracting some areas? Articulating this will guide you in evaluating your administration structure to determine what positions you need and why. This means developing a list of all the responsibilities and tasks that are part of administration. In that list include what should be getting done, but is not. ***The best time to begin this process is when a key member of your administration has left or is***

***leaving the firm.*** Many law firm administrations have developed ad hoc, as the firm has grown, a little like a Dr. Seuss house. The result can be similar work being done by two people, one person who has all the knowledge in a certain area, or a critical responsibility not being handled by anyone and therefore not getting done.

As part of the due diligence, seek input from the firm's shareholders, associates, paralegals and administrative assistants. When information has been gathered, compare current administration position job descriptions with your list of responsibilities. Arrange the responsibilities in categories. The number of categories should indicate the number of positions. From this data, job descriptions can be developed and from the job descriptions, job titles can be determined. Be creative during this process and think out of the box. Just because one person has had a certain responsibility for as long as you can remember, it doesn't mean it has to be that way in the future. During this exercise, it's important to stay focused on what is good for the firm. Do not create a job for a specific individual. Eventually you will be sorry you did. Don't look at the exercise as a way to cut costs. Too often administration positions are eliminated for this short-sighted reason. Stay focused on long term goals.

As new job descriptions are developed and people are given new or additional responsibilities (and may have some taken away), remember that it is important to have people cross-trained so that there are checks and balances in your structure. Don't create an administrative structure where one person has so much control that he or she can make commitments or function without another person knowing. This is critical in the accounting area where embezzlement can occur.

When the new job descriptions are complete, it's time to meet with all of the members of your administration and review the findings. (Remember, there are no secrets in law firms!) Thoroughly discuss the benefits you see from the new structure. Ask for their support and require that if they have an issue they come to you, the managing partner, and not discuss the matter with others in the office. Gain agreement from the administration team members that they are there to support each other. If there is any member of the team that can't do that, then you don't have a team.

How do you deal with resistance when initiating the new administration restructuring? Go back to the long-term firm goals. Be able to explain the goals succinctly. Some people may still be disgruntled, but if that's the case, you have a clue that person is probably not your best long-term fit to meet the goals of your firm. Knowing this can be of great benefit, as you plan to make future administration changes.

Making the effort to evaluate how the managing partner and the firm's administration work together is a worthwhile exercise regardless of the size of your firm. The results can be amazing: greater efficiency, new energy, greater depth of knowledge and possible cost savings.