

The Lawyer's Role in Lawyer/Staff Relations

By Paul Sullivan and Kettie A. Sprenger



Are you keeping up your side of the employer/employee relationship?

more important than assistant's personal life.

2. Be consistently late for meetings, hearings, depositions, etc., and always ask assistants to make up excuses for tardiness.

3. Give rush assignments and then hover over every keystroke and interrupt every five minutes.

4. Give a rush project (a brief, response, memo of law, etc.) that could have been assigned ahead of deadline, thus making the deadline everyone else's problem – then leave the office.

5. View an assistant as "less than intelligent" because he or she does not have the same level of education as you.

6. Criticize mistakes – ignoring the fact that many times the assistant has corrected yours and never said a word.

7. Fail to give instructions for an assigned task before the job is completed.

8. Do not take advantage of available technology – communication tools, cell phone, e-mail, voice mail, etc.

Past articles in this space have addressed employee productivity, office conflict, and employee loyalty. The view of these articles has primarily been from the top down – what we expect of our staff, our gripes about them, what we want them to do, and how we get them to do the job effectively and efficiently.

There is another component to this process, though – our responsibilities as managers. The Law Office Economics Section recently held a series of roundtable discussion groups on various law office management topics, one of which was the relationship between supervisors and their staff. One of the moderators has worked at various staff levels in a law firm for over 20 years and now is an administrative assistant to a very busy and productive litigation attorney. In preparation for the session, she interviewed staff in other firms, both large and small, and asked them for input on this topic: "What are your complaints and what can the attorneys do to make your job easier to perform effectively?"

We suspect that some who read these responses will react negatively. After all, we pay these people to do the work – why don't they just do the job and not complain? But if you read between the lines you'll see that a few simple adjustments and some basic consideration will make your employees more effective, productive, and loyal. Isn't it worth a try?

Here are results of that poll. Contributors included administrative assistants, paralegals, and support staff of central Illinois firms who responded anonymously. Most have been working at law firms for at least 10 years.

Things that make our job more difficult –

1. View the lawyer's personal life as

9. As for feedback, give mostly negative, rarely positive, or none at all – even in annual reviews.

10. Fail to recognize the assistant who consistently goes the extra mile and who does not have the "it's a job" attitude!

11. Call for revisions, revisions, revisions, revisions – they drive assistants crazy. Revisions impede workflow and create inconsistency, confusion, and delay.

12. Leave the office and don't tell anyone (it gives us a chance to be creative about where you

might be).

13. Make an assistant feel like a solo performer and not part of the team.

14. Expect the assistant to read your mind.

15. Fail to consider constructive or creative suggestions, ideas, and opinions.

16. Fail to communicate about daily tasks, scheduling, assignments, phone calls, court hearings, etc.

17. Keep it a secret that you like my work.

18. Wait until my annual review to tell me what my goals should have been.

19. Don't introduce me to clients (that I may have worked with for many months) who are with you because you don't think I have the ability to meet and greet people (or am I not important?).

20. Install new equipment (i.e. computers, phones, dictation equipment, copiers, etc.) – without seeking input from the people who use it.

Things that make our job easier and your firm run more efficiently –

1. Treat your assistant fairly and with respect, giving consideration to his or her personal/family commitments (child care, school meetings, medical appointments, etc.).

2. Acknowledge and give consideration to suggestions submitted by assistants that may improve day-to-day operations and be good for the company as a whole.

3. Deliver feedback that can be relied upon as the gauge by which performance is measured.

4. Make assistants feel like part of the litigation team up to and through trial and keep them informed about trial proceedings. We also derive satisfaction from the end result.

5. Recognize that much of the reward is the creative challenge of the work itself and the chance to keep learning; money is not everything.

6. Recognize that the new model of authority in the workplace is to empower individuals to make decisions and delegate responsibility, allowing them to use and develop their initiative.

7. Recognize committed assistants. Committed workers, like pebbles in a pond, may send ripples of good feeling to others.

8. Provide performance feedback, and not just annually. Acknowledge and reward people's strengths and accomplishments. The committed workers are the "natural boosters" of a company.

9. Offer assignments that challenge and foster skills. When attorneys deprive assistants of specific job-related information, they unknowingly inhibit performance.

10. Be tolerant of mistakes, not punishing for them but helping assistants learn from them. Mistakes can be treasures, a chance to improve.

11. Praise assistants when they do a good job. And let them know when they make a mistake, recognizing that you have to let them know *what* they need to improve.

12. Communicate, communicate.

Communication is a key player in the working relationship. Lack thereof causes major complications and stress for those who schedule and organize.

13. Expect the best from people; it can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. ■

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