

Editor's Perspective



By David W. deBruin, Esquire

The Right Stuff

Depending upon your practice area, there is no doubt that a good team of support staff is essential for a successful legal practice. I am truly fortunate because I currently happen to have a fantastic team of people whom I rely upon heavily in my practice on a daily basis.

As with any relationship, it usually takes a good bit of time to develop a level of trust with others to allow them the freedom to respond to adversaries and deadlines. There is a natural learning curve when you indoctrinate new members of your support staff. By monitoring their work product, you can develop a good sense of what skill sets people actually bring to the table. It is important to note that what people actually do well and what people *think* they do well is not always one in the same.

During the years I have been practicing, I have fluctuated between having a large and diverse support staff who does everything, as well as, significant portions of time during which I was the sole member of my staff. I suppose part of this evolution was related to where I was working, but part was certainly due to the people whom I was working with.

There are a number of different views on how best to train and motivate the people you work with as a practicing attorney. As a practical matter, for newly admitted attorneys, there are many people who have worked as support staff for many years, who would rightfully enjoy the opportunity to train you. That being said, in this article I will only touch on a couple of styles that I have observed for illustrative purposes.

One of the attorneys I previously

worked with literally told me that I should treat my support staff like dogs. Not the way most people treat their pets (as a beloved member of the family), rather, much more like the way former professional quarterback, Michael Vick, treated the dogs in his dog-fighting business (for which he is now serving time in a federal prison). This attorney truly believed if you were nice to your support staff they would ultimately take complete advantage of your kindness. Sadly, this attorney definitely practiced what he preached.

I couldn't tolerate his deplorable behavior and I let him know this on many occasions. Furthermore, when I did come to the defense of members of his support staff (some of which I shared), I was blamed for softening them up and allowing them far too much leeway. Somehow, my treating them with respect and asking them to work together to produce the best possible work product was allegedly creating a collective laziness. I am pretty sure it had nothing to do with the fact that based upon how we each treated the support staff, my work seemed to take priority and get done with greater care and attention. Does sarcasm transfer in print? In any case, this is not a style I embrace in any way, nor is it one I suggest any attorney utilizes with support staff.

A very different style regarding the training and motivation of the people with whom you work as a practicing attorney is creating the ideal team mentality. If you can't tell already, this is a concept to which I am particularly wed. No doubt you have all heard about and/or are personally aware of this model as

it relates to corporate America. However, this really can translate in the legal profession. Granted the make up of your team of support staff can vary greatly by practice area and in cases where there is a team of one, some of this philosophy does not necessarily translate.

Keeping in mind what I wrote earlier (what people actually do well and what people *think* they do well is not always one in the same); I think that an attorney can maximize the quality and quantity of work product by dividing tasks amongst each team member. I am also a believer in soliciting input from my support staff on how to improve our processes and/or work product. A few other key elements are ensuring that each support staff team member is flexible enough to assist the group on virtually any project and rewarding the team when appropriate for excellent work. Once you have this type of structure in place, it will soon become readily apparent if you have people who are not willing to truly buy into the system and/or are just going through the motions.

I am not trying to advocate any particular style. I simply know what works best for my practice. However, I am trying to advocate for attorneys to recognize that your support staff is an integral part of any success you may achieve and they need to be recognized as such. On that note, Administrative Professionals Day was on April 23rd. If this article is the first time that you have heard about this day of well-deserved recognition, it is likely time for you to take your support staff to lunch. 🍷