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Characteristics and Skills Possessed by Valued Law Firm Administrators



By Joel A. Rose

Lawyer management (managing partners and members of executive committees) in the more enlightened firms of all sizes and specialties have become sensitized to three facts of life about their roles in firm management. First, partners in most firms lack the desire and skills to manage effectively, efficiently and profitably. Second, they must devote more of their time, effort and energy to establish and implement policies and to communicate with other lawyers about issues and decisions for their firms' continued success. Third, managing partners and members of executive committees recognize the value of employing professional law firm administrators to introduce higher levels of acumen about financial analyses and management reporting, human resources management, technological and organizational skills to better manage their law firms as professional business organizations.

To the extent that administrators bring particular management insights and business training to law firms, what, then, are the personal characteristics and the professional skills that certain administrators possess, that others don't, that make the former "highly valued administrators?"

After discussing this question with numerous managing partners during the author's extensive experience as a management consultant to law offices, several inescapable conclusions which contribute to the long-term success of valuable administrators are readily apparent. Managing partners are in complete agreement that those administrators who add value to their firms understand their role, authority and responsibility, *vis a vis* the partners' expectations. They understand the firm's current and evolving culture (or cultures), and are capable of integrating their behavior with it (them). The more valuable administrators possess the capability of acclimating their management styles to complement and supplement the formal and informal organizational relationships between the partners, associates and support staffs about those issues which influence the substantive and business sides of their practices.

Further, successful administrators possess those intuitive personal characteristics and learned professional/technical skills that enable them to perform their roles to satisfy the partners' objectives and expectations. Some managing partners prefer to communicate by "writing and reading memoranda" while others are more verbal and prefer to "listen and talk." Some are "micro" managers, while others are "macro" managers. Astute administrators make sure they learn quickly the preferred approaches of their managing

partners and act accordingly. This being said, an administrator's ability to successfully implement these conclusions, over an extended period of time, is as challenging as the most sophisticated legal problem a client may retain the firm to resolve.

An administrator's value to a given law firm will have a direct correlation to his or her level of acceptance by the partners, organizationally and personally. And this level of acceptance will vary over time, depending upon the firm's evolving leadership, financial position and changing client base. The firm's present and evolving culture will determine the value that the managing partner and members of executive committees place on their administrator. To the extent a firm is entrepreneurial in nature, and its partners display a sense of urgency when addressing client matters, the latter may expect their administrator to react in a similar manner when dealing with firm priorities. An administrator whose personal style may be characterized by partners as "too laid back" (or "laid out," as described by one managing partner) may be inappropriate for that firm. Similarly, an administrator with a "Type A" personality may not succeed in a firm characterized by partners who are "very low key" or "more laid back than most."

In today's highly competitive practice environment, partners place a much higher value on those administrators who understand, and are able to relate to the firms' immediate and longer term priorities. Partners want their administrators to have the capacity to successfully synthesize the attorneys, support staffs, the firm's technology and facilities into a well organized and effectively and efficiently managed operation. They seek to retain those administrators who perceive the firm from a "partner's" perspective, not from an "employee's point of view." Partners value those administrators who are innovative and willing to question the status quo, and suggest alternative approaches, within their firm's culture, for enhancing productivity, profitability as well as good morale, on the substantive as well as the business sides of the practice. Partners value those administrators who are proactive and who network with administrators in other law firms, comparable in size and type to theirs and larger. Partners are interested to learn about those newer methods that have/are being implemented in other progressively managed law firms which may improve management concepts, administrative and substantive procedures and enhance profitability and productivity.

Partners find it difficult to replace those administrators who have the appropriate balance of intelligence and common sense that enable the latter to communicate effectively with the former, and who can weigh the potential benefits to be derived by implementing policies and procedures which may affect the operations of the firm and its components, directly or indirectly, in relation to the tangible and intangible costs incurred by introducing these concepts.

Administrators who add value to their firms make a conscious effort to relieve partners of managing the day to day administrative and planning activities which can consume significant amounts of lawyer time. Instinctively, they have a special sense about how and when to communicate with the managing partner and members of executive committees about those administrative, accounting, lawyer-support personnel policy

issues, technology issues, facilities and strategic and marketing planning activities that should be brought to the partners' attention.

Highly valued administrators provide managing partners with "early warning" signals about anticipated financial and cash flow problems resulting from billings and collections problems. They know how and when to recommend to managing partners and members of executive committees on the cost-effective staffing and utilization of the firm's administrative support departments, and interface with the lawyers and administrative personnel in a constructive manner. The more desirable administrators can resolve most administrative problems with minimal guidance from their managing partners or members of executive committees, and communicate the results of their work, rather than seeking advice about how to do it.

The author's management consulting firm has been retained by law firms across the country to recruit replacement administrators who have resigned to pursue other opportunities within and outside of the legal profession, and to replace administrators who have been terminated. Regardless of how effectively partners believe their firms are being managed, it is the author's opinion that a certain amount of change is beneficial for any organization. Hence, notwithstanding that partners would prefer not to have to replace an administrator, especially if the incumbent is perceived to be a gem, in the event of the departure of a highly valued administrator, there is little that partners can do but view the new recruiting experience philosophically, as an opportunity to upgrade the firm's management practices, consistent with its longer term needs and priorities.

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