

Legal Management Services, Inc.

Helping attorneys create financial independence

64 River Mist Lane, Memphis, TN 38103-0892
901.581.5390 cell ■ 901.297.4211 fax
jerry@legalmanagementservices.com

Leadership....Management....Administration

By: Jerry Schwartz, President of Legal Management Services, Inc.

It's eight o'clock on Monday morning. Four of the five partners in the firm are sitting around the conference room table for the monthly partners meeting. The telephone rings in the conference room. The partner closest to the phone answers, hears the voice of the managing partner on his cellular phone, "I'm tied up in traffic, will be there in fifteen minutes." The disgruntled partners fill up on coffee awaiting the arrival of their "leader." The managing partner arrives and asks, "What's going on in the firm?" No agenda. No plan. No organization.

One of the partners mentions the need for a new facsimile machine in the office, another gripes about the office clerk, another reads the daily newspaper and one is reviewing draft billing statements that were due out the previous week.

The clerk is also a problem with the managing partner. A discussion begins on the duties of the office clerk, the pay scale and the qualities needed in a good clerk. At 9:30 a.m., two partners must leave the meeting to meet with clients. The meeting breaks up without a decision on what to do regarding the clerk position. There's been no discussion

about the fax machine and surely no discussion about the current financial condition of the firm, the caseload of the partners and associates or the future of the firm.

In time, the meeting cost the partners about \$750.00 in lost fees. Nothing was decided. No one was informed about the current workload or financial condition of the firm and worst of all the future of the practice was not even mentioned. Today, this is all too often a common occurrence in the law office.

In order to successfully operate a law office the following three characteristics are important for those people who will be in charge of the operations:

Leadership - to uplift and inspire others to make a difference.

Management - to develop goals and to direct the operation.

Administration - to provide the follow-through to ensure that the goals of the firm are accomplished.

If the characteristics of the operation of a law office were compared to a human body, leadership would be the intellect and soul, management would be the heart and nervous system and administration would be the arms and legs. All are as essential to the human body to function, as are leadership, management and administration to the law firm to operate successfully.

What are the qualities and the duties that are required in each of these important characteristics?

LEADERSHIP

Vision is the word that is most often associated with leadership. The law office of today needs a person who can see the firm in a global sense. All too often, we look at the firm through a microscope to solve the problem at hand. The leader will see the firm from the macro-management perspective and should have the following qualities:

Intelligence - the ability to plan, organize and solve problems. Be an expert and have as complete a knowledge as possible. Educate yourself through reading or attending seminars. Network with people to determine what is successfully being accomplished in law firms.

Willingness to accept responsibility for results. Encourage risk and don't punish people for making honest mistakes. Rather than seeking blame, solve the problem and move on. Everyone grows when positive, constructive action is taken.

Integrity - being scrupulously honest with others and yourself. A mutual bond of trust and respect acts as a stimulus for superior achievement. Everyone must know that you will stand behind your words and actions.

Caring for people - sincerity and the ability to get along with others. Fear and adversity work against the successful operation of the firm. People must look on the working relationship as a team effort. People work better with their friends than they do with their enemies. Listen and know the problems that are occurring in the lives of the staff. Keep these problems in mind when

assigning work so that stress is reduced and the goals of the firm are not jeopardized.

Competence - the ability to get the job done with a sense of urgency. Clear priorities must be set and tasks must be completed one at a time. Concentrate on achieving the greatest results in the shortest period of time and delegating everything else.

Courage - a willingness to take risks, accept challenges and to speak out when you disagree. To perform tasks because they have always been done is the wrong way to manage a law office. You should find new and innovative ways of accomplishing the objectives of the firm. People should be encouraged to speak their minds. You must have candid opinions and honest feedback from your professional and support staff.

Inner strength - determination, persistence, guts. Once the vision of the firm is established, you must follow through to the conclusion. You will encounter resistance along the way because change causes disruption of the routine and most people have a difficult time dealing with the disruption.

MANAGEMENT

Strategy is the word that can be used to describe the responsibility that management has in the operation of the law office. The law office needs a person that can prepare the blueprint to realize the goals of the firm, which includes the following tasks:

Plan - the ability to develop a system to accomplish the goals of the organization. Firms will often talk about where they want to be in the next few years, but will not spend the time to determine an approach to accomplishing their goals.

Organize - to arrange in such a way as to accomplish the goals of the firm. Many firms will go so far as to put their plan in writing, but then it sits in a file folder because they do not have the ability to bring the plan into being.

Schedule - to set a timed plan for a project. The management of the firm must set a timetable and accountability for the accomplishment of the plan. If the schedule for completion of the project is not on the calendar of those who are responsible and if they are not held accountable, the chances of completion are slim.

Policies - governing principles that must be in writing. The rules of the firm must be known by all. Policies set a level playing field for all participants in the firm. The perception of "fair" is very important to both the professional and support staff members of the firm.

Procedure - a particular course or method of action. One of the most important records that can be developed for the completion of a consistent work product.

Many firms recreate the wheel each time a project must be completed and every time a newly hired person performs the task. A procedure's manual

prepared and updated on a regular basis will help to eliminate a substandard work product.

Teach - to provide with knowledge and insight. Management must communicate and instruct the employees or provide for the instruction of the employees in the tasks necessary for them to perform their designated functions.

Decision Making - the act of making up one's mind. The management of the firm must obtain as much information as is reasonably possible to make a good decision and then the decision should be made. This is one of the weakest areas of law firm management. Law firm management will try to outguess any criticism of their decisions and analyze the trivial in order not to receive negative criticism on a particular decision.

Availability - to allow professional and support staff the opportunity to take advantage of the direction of management. All too often the firm management is unavailable to the staff and the overall operation suffers.

Listening - to make a conscious effort to hear. Most people are thinking about the reply they are going to make to the question or comment and fail to really "hear" what the individual is saying. Listening requires the use of both the sense of hearing and sight. Body language says a great deal about what a

person is saying. If management does not spend the time to adequately listen, a misunderstanding is likely to occur.

ADMINISTRATION

Follow-through is the best word to describe the actions that the administrative duties of the law office entail. Someone must be responsible for administering the programs to insure that the goals of the firm are accomplished.

Hiring - the development of job descriptions and the selection of staff with sufficient quality standards to accomplish the duties for a successful operation of the firm.

Training - establish formal in house programs to teach the procedures and equipment used in the office and sufficient outside training to provide adequate knowledge so the employees can perform their assigned duties.

Facilities/Equipment - provide adequate working space, equipment and working conditions for the employees to function in their positions.

Supervision - provide direction to all staff at every level to insure that the firm's goals are attained.

Depending on the size of the law office, leadership, management and administration may have to be embodied in one person or in the case of larger firms, a management team. There will always be some overlap in the areas. This can be a cause for some cloudiness in the management of the law office.

In many law offices, the managing partner or management committee have trouble prioritizing their work and become too involved in the administration of the office. Lawyers spend untold numbers of hours discussing administrative detail when it is best left to the office manager or a member of the support staff. It is understandable that the owners of the business might be interested in the operations, however, the firm is better served by the attorney providing client services which generate revenue for the firm.

Delegation of duties to the proper level is one of the most important duties of a person who has a management responsibility.

It is the most cost effective way to manage a firm, however, delegation is one of the most difficult traits to develop. Most people have the attitude that it is easier to perform a task by themselves than to delegate it to someone else. That may be true if the task is short and will never have to be done again, but for most tasks, delegation is imperative. The manager must learn how to delegate. An article, "The Art of Delegation" appeared in an issue of Small Business Report more than ten years ago but is still on point with the ten tips it suggested then:

1. Overcome the reluctance to delegate.
2. Decide what to delegate.
3. Identify those capable and willing to handle additional responsibilities.
4. Be patient.
5. Do not take back a delegated task.

6. Transfer both responsibility and authority.
7. Hold subordinates accountable for their work.
8. Put it in writing.
9. Allow freedom without abdicating control.
10. Evaluate results accomplished.

The overall management of a law firm requires that the firm have a vision, a strategy to accomplish it and the follow-through to bring the vision to reality. Much has been written in the last few years on total quality management and reengineering the workplace. Generally, lawyers have not considered changes in the manner in which they handle the delivery of legal services. With the increased competition, law offices that do not look to the future are sure to be left behind by those that are moving ahead and making an attempt to manage their offices.