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MANAGEMENT

Managing Partner Expectations

How nonlawyer management staff can (and should) work hand-in-hand with attorneys

By Christine S. Filip

Managing the expectations of partners raises unsettling issues when the discussion is between a partner-owner and a nonowner staff professional. How does management staff proceed in this uneasy environment to effectively manage, or more realistically, negotiate expected results with partners? More to the point, as the Great Recession recedes, how can staff contribute to the future of the firm, particularly in the area of business development, when the distribution of power is uneven?

In the process of assembling materials for this article, I asked these questions of some of my colleagues in accounting firms, since accounting firms are often central to the review and advisement of management operations in law firms, and, truth be stated, they sipped the marketing tonic a bit earlier than law firms. Finally, the growth of many CPA firms stems from acquisitions and mergers, and, as a result, those that are successful have encountered the need to create a common culture and expectations to flourish, two learning points that are pivotal to law firms.

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Any working relationship in any industry between a professional employee and his/her manager is effective when two factors are present:

- The expectations of both parties are the result of a negotiation about reasonable outcomes, based on objective data, *not* unilaterally imposed. For example, my colleague Rhonda Maraziti, director of marketing and practice growth at WithumSmith+Brown, relates: "Teaming with the marketing department, we develop a strategy to best leverage our dollars, with decisions based on past experiences as well as data analytics derived from our own revenue numbers or through the communication tools and/or media channels we use."
- Expected outcomes are open to further discussion if circumstances change.

Culture Creates Behavioral Expectations

A threshold earmark of successful leadership is the open discussion and embrace of core values and goals that motivate behavior to produce results that benefit an organization. Commonly held expectations produce concerted actions. As a longtime ex-IBMer, when I meet other exes, we often chuckle at the management phrases we have in common, such as "completed staff work," meaning take solutions, not problems, to your superiors; "you must earn the right to new business"; and "if your people don't get promoted, neither will you." These writings on the walls of our minds were clear expectations that mediated our behavior on the job and results for the firm. It was not Kool-Aid, but vitamins.

Rhonda Maraziti describes the culture of her firm this way: "We have a strong marketing culture at WithumSmith+Brown, and our CEO is 100 percent in support of my department's efforts. It is expected that our partner group work with members of my team to develop short- and long-term marketing strategies and growth goals for their offices and their niches."

Susan Wernick, director, public relations, at Bederson & Company LLC, says,

"We have a marketing mindset, which is key. Our firm was built on entrepreneurial spirit 75 years ago. Our leadership has vision and understands the necessity of educated risk taking."

Applying the process of creating a common culture to managing partner expectations in law firms is tricky business because it means managing up; literally, the influencing of owners by nonowners, and owners who are often more individualistic decision-makers than they are team-minded players. Having said that, anyone who is not at the pinnacle of power in the workplace has to manage up. This is a pervasive negotiation paradigm across all industry sectors and summons a reprise of the elements of both principled negotiation and coaching, albeit on the fuzzy topic of enculturation, which is an articulation of common goals to get more concerted activity.

Negotiating and Coaching Up

As a business professional, management staff in law firms are paid for the intellectual ownership of their areas of expertise. Ownership means the giving of your best advice and the management of your area to produce results that you and partners expect. So as not to confuse efforts with results, any time the issue of "expectations" is on the table, it requires a two-way negotiation, meaning a discussion of common goals within a range of best interests for both parties, in the presence of conflict, and leading to an expected result with which both parties can thrive. Significantly, a negotiation means that both parties adopt changed or new behaviors.

You cannot manage partner expectations without negotiating a result you both can embrace. For example, in the midst of the recession, many law-firm managers were "expected" and directed to cut expenses. If your response was "Fine, I'll do that," without the concomitant negotiation on how the firm is setting expectations for the other side of the coin, which is revenue generation, the scale of how much you are expected to cut and how often, is out of your hands. This is not your best advice, is it?

When managing partner expectations is a principled negotiation, everyone wins, but the framing of expectations as a negotiation, per se, takes the courage to offer your best advice and get the other side to contribute to a better result at the same time. As a professional, you need to do the work of pre-planning a negotiation. If the very concrete issue of expense-cutting is on the table, what actions taken by the partner would affect better revenue generation? The list of potential beneficial actions is well documented and requires you to do "completed staff work," literally preparing a list of options or decisions.

The coaching element of a negotiation relies on your ability to discuss why the partner should contribute to a better outcome. In the expense-cutting scenario, usually with a managing partner, the coaching insight should be based on objective facts and standards. For example, one might say, "Your [the partner's] voice is needed to get more attorneys to be active in business development activities because ....":

- Revenue is down 8 percent over last year, and to make up that difference we need at least three (a number reliant on your analysis) more partners to be involved in business development activities such as speaking, writing and getting involved in organizations in which our best clients and client prospects participate;
- If you are to get that kind of cooperation, you need to articulate that our firm's culture is one of acting like a team, pitching in; and
- I will translate your expectations to my team, and you need to openly endorse behaviors that remediate our financial position.

Inspect What You Expect

The first axiom of good management is to inspect what you expect along the way so that there are no surprises. Here is how Rhonda Maraziti uses client relationship management (CRM) software to inspect progress every two weeks and then after client acquisition:

> [W]e track our new opportunities utilizing our CRM tool, and have developed a pipeline report that we generate from the data in CRM. A biweekly report is shared and discussed amongst our partner group.
>
> Client revenue overall is tracked and analyzed using a software tool we had customized to generate the reports we need (client revenue and realization by niche, by office, by partner, etc.).

My colleague, Gabriel Caponetto, director of new business development for Citron Cooperman in Livingston, has an effective program for managing partner expectations around new business development. In the sales management domain, this process is called activity management, which is the regular procedure of inspecting actions that you expect. Every two weeks Gabe meets with partners in his office to analyze the steps he and the partner have taken to accomplish business-development results.

In Sum

Were we all to take one piece of learning from the Great Recession, it would be the necessity of reconfiguring our working relationships inside the firm so that we all reach our best expectations. ■