

PART I

An Introduction to People Management

The first part of this book will introduce you to the importance of managing and motivating people in your law firm. It explains why and how your ability to do so contributes to the overall success of your firm and employees. Your fellow firm members—attorneys and staff alike—are your firm’s most significant asset and the magic ingredient that will go far in distinguishing your firm from others and ensuring its success.

As a manager, it is your responsibility to hire, train, develop, coordinate, and motivate the people in your firm. This part will introduce you to the “champion manager”—a man or woman who is extraordinarily skillful and effective in the performance of his or her managerial duties. It will give you the foundation you need to not just become more effective but to also think and act like a champion for your firm and employees.

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Why People Management Matters

If you're like most lawyers, you graduated from law school with relatively little, if any, management experience. Perhaps you're one of the few who held a management position before entering law school. Or you may lack hands-on experience, but know something about management theory from undergraduate courses. Or you may have graduated with neither knowledge nor experience, but tried to learn management by trial and error or by reading a management bestseller. Or maybe you haven't cared much about management until now, as you find yourself responsible for and challenged by the supervision of other people. Which ever group you fit into and whatever your level of managerial experience, this book will accelerate your growth as a manager of lawyers and legal professionals.

One of the catalysts for writing this book came from working with a recently promoted partner in a boutique law firm. She had no real training on how to delegate, supervise, and give constructive feedback yet show appreciation.

Her aggressive personal style made her an excellent litigator, but got in the way of her ability to successfully delegate to and train the associates who now reported to her. We searched for a management course or existing book for lawyers that would teach her how to develop, supervise, and motivate the people in her firm. Finding nothing current or relevant, we took on the challenge ourselves.

The need for this book became even more apparent soon thereafter when we facilitated a series of Managing Partners' Roundtable meetings for small to mid-sized law firms. When asked to identify their single most significant management challenge, the partners responded it was managing the people in their firms—not receivables, not expenses, not risk, not technology—but people. Finding good talent, mentoring young lawyers, getting their writing ability to “excellent,” and developing them for potential partnership were common themes. Many of the managing partners wanted to improve their own mentoring, delegation, and feedback skills. Also mentioned were people issues of transition, succession planning, and passing the torch to the next generation of leaders and potential rainmakers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

The managing partners' focus on people is not surprising: a firm's most significant asset is its people. Although managing partners and firm owners have traditionally dedicated most of their time to marketing and providing their firms' services, an increasing number are understanding the critical importance of developing the “product” that the firm is trying to persuade its clients to buy: the knowledge and

skill of its members (Maister, 1993). To develop a firm's human and intellectual capital—and by this we mean the collective judgment, knowledge, experience, and ability of its members—there must be an *ongoing, continual* effort at all levels (Maister, 1993, p. 155). Absent this effort, firms will have little to sell and limited means to deliver it.

This became especially clear to us in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis when law firm clients cut their legal spending, pushed back on attorney billing rates, and engaged in fewer transactions. Many firms that had been doing well began questioning whether they could survive, let alone remain profitable. Under these new and increased financial pressures, some imploded or dissolved, while others merged into healthier firms. Some firms survived but became less profitable as partners and practice areas left them to start or join new firms. In the midst of this instability, we saw startling differences between how well-managed and poorly managed firms dealt with what would soon be called the “new normal.”

Firms with weak management fared worse than their better and more actively managed counterparts. We found that prior to the downturn most partners in both kinds of firms overlooked some important problems because they were generally satisfied with their compensation and career development. More importantly, they believed in their firm's future. But once the effects of the recession were felt and dollars became scarce, many once-latent problems became heated points of contention. Disagreements about compensation, allocation of resources (both human and financial), governance, strategy, and direction were more frequent in both kinds of firms.

Well-managed and led firms had an easier time dealing with these complex and difficult issues. Because communication was better in these firms, managing partners had a deeper and quicker understanding of their firm members' concerns. As a result, they could act sooner, people felt heard, and morale remained reasonably high. The relationships that formed the core of these healthy firms were certainly tested, but they, for the most part, survived and, in some cases, were strengthened by the members' shared predicament. Firms that had already paid attention to training and development had an easier time of retraining and reallocating their people to practice areas like insolvency that were active during the recession.

Poorly managed firms, on the other hand, had to play catch-up ball. It is sad and ironic that some firms that did an excellent job of preparing for the worst and hoping for the best when working with clients had so neglected their own management needs. In many cases, poor communication and passive management left them ill prepared to promptly address issues and respond to their members' fears. One managing partner we worked with described it as trying to finish building the car after the race had already begun. Levels of stress and distrust were higher in these firms, which only made necessary decisions and conversations between firm stakeholders that much harder. For the most part, they were slower to adapt to changing economic conditions, and they showed higher levels of turnover—both planned and unwanted. In some of these firms, attorneys and staff were treated poorly and “discarded” in shortsighted efforts to quickly reduce expenses. Many of these firms now have gaps at certain levels of partners and associates as a result of those hasty layoffs, while

firms that treated their employees well have seen employees stay more loyal as the economy has improved.

Today, more than ever, in this 24-hour-a-day business world, all members of a firm (whether they are partners, associates, of counsel, paralegals, legal secretaries, managers, or other staff) must work together as a team for the benefit of their clients. Each person makes his or her own unique contribution to the team based on what the law firm's culture values as important. Coordinating and getting the most out of everyone's contributions is the responsibility of the firm's management, and treating employees well is a good strategy for winning the war for talent.

PEOPLE MANAGEMENT IS THIS BOOK'S MAIN FOCUS

This book focuses on people management and, more specifically, on the conversations, interactions, and relationships that are essential for engaging the people in your firm, developing them, coordinating them, holding them accountable, and fostering their morale and retention. Simply put: your people are the key to getting things done in your firm. How well you manage them will have a significant impact on your firm's profitability, culture, and sustainability.

There are other aspects of people management that we have chosen to exclude from the scope of this book, such as human resources administration, employment law compliance, compensation, perks and benefits, staffing strategies, personnel policies, and employee handbooks, just to mention a few. By omitting them, we are not suggesting they are of secondary importance. We've simply found that

lawyers are often more comfortable and adept in these more technical and tangible aspects of people management. Some very good resources are already in print (see the Resources list at the end of this chapter).

It's helpful to look at people management in terms of "what" and "how." Attorneys are usually better at figuring out *what* needs to be done when it comes to managing their people than *how* to go about doing it. Articulating policies and setting procedures aren't terribly difficult for them, but *how* these policies and procedures are communicated, implemented, monitored, and enforced is often a greater challenge. They may have a clear idea of what their reports need to do better, but not know how to help them to make those improvements. They may also avoid difficult management conversations or struggle to sustain the good working relationships that are the glue of a high-functioning firm. Some attorneys confound their employees by making frequent exceptions to stated policies, giving the appearance that management decisions are being made on an ad hoc basis (Maister, 2006).¹

People management is an undervalued and overlooked way to promote productivity, performance, and profitability. Why is this the case? Although it seldom requires an investment of money, it does require an investment of time. Even those lawyers who acknowledge the importance of management often complain they can seldom spend the time they need for it. There's no question that time is of

1. Maister likens this tendency to the common law tradition of making distinctions between the facts in a prior case and holding from those in a current one. He suggests that because of this, lawyers become adept and comfortable at making frequent exceptions to established firm policies and practices.

paramount importance to attorneys—wasted and lost time can result in lower realization rates, revenues, and profits. Many attorneys we work with initially feel that time spent on management matters can better be spent on billable matters, especially urgent ones.

We encourage them to see management time as an *investment*, not an *expense*! Like any investment, there may not be an immediate payback. It may take several billing cycles before the time spent developing an associate or resolving a conflict is reflected in higher productivity, revenue, morale, and retention. But the benefits of good people management are likely to be long lasting, a sort of human capital annuity over the long run.

INTRODUCING THE “CHAMPION MANAGER”

There are many adjectives that can be used to describe the best law firm managers. These men and women are more than competent and effective. Referring to them as exemplary, consummate, or complete managers is better, but it still leaves the focus solely on the individual manager. We have chosen to call them “champion managers” for three reasons:

- First, they are champions in demonstrating the highest levels of people management skills.
- Second, and of more importance, they are dedicated to championing the members of their firms, by developing them to their full potential, and fostering relationships among them so they can work together smoothly and efficiently for the benefit of their firm and its clients.

- And third, through their development efforts, they end up managing their own team of champions.

THIS BOOK'S ORGANIZATION

This book is divided into four parts that build upon one another.

- **Part I: An Introduction to People Management** explains the vital importance of people management, describes the key attributes and responsibilities of champion managers, and explains the relationship between people management and leadership. It also explains why it's necessary to think like a champion manager before you can act like one.
- **Part II: The Champion Manager Toolkit** identifies the three things you will need to become a champion manager of people: the right mindset, the right skills and tools, and the right resources and support from others. Chapters 4 through 13 provide practical and detailed guidance on how to hone and expand your communication skills; hire and onboard new employees; delegate and assign work; give and receive feedback; train, supervise, develop, and mentor your employees; engage, motivate, and retain them; promote collaboration and teamwork; manage conflicts; and create high morale and a positive firm culture.
- **Part III: Managing Specific Individuals and Situations** looks at some of the common personalities and people management challenges that lawyers

encounter in running their firms. It also discusses various facets of what we call “ethical management,” such as promoting diversity, responding to harassment and bullying, and dealing with substance abuse and addictive behaviors.

- **Part IV: Becoming the Complete Champion Manager** helps readers reflect on their management abilities; discover whether they are doing a good job; and find the management styles that work best for them, their firm, and their reports.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to make it easier and less time consuming for attorneys to effectively manage the people in their firms. Whether you are a new partner, a new managing partner, or a new lawyer, it is a resource you can turn to when challenges arise—be they interpersonal conflicts, how to build a team mentality, or simply how to delegate work. Even though it has been written with the management needs of small and mid-sized firms in mind, managers in corporate and government legal departments will also find our advice relevant and valuable.

We recommend that lawyers with limited management experience use this book as a primer or training manual, and start at the beginning and read chapter by chapter in sequential fashion. Each chapter and part builds on earlier ones that provide helpful context for those that follow.

More experienced managers may be tempted to skip directly to the skills and tools discussed in Part II or the specific management challenges addressed in Part III. This

is understandable—you want to get to the tangible take-aways and techniques that this book offers. But before doing so, we ask you to at least skim and familiarize yourself with the chapters “The Champion Manager Mindset” in Part I and “Building a Champion Management Support System” in Part II. There are two good reasons we make this request. First, it will be a lot easier for you to learn and employ champion management skills and techniques if you first understand the concepts that underlie them. Some traditional assumptions and beliefs we all share can get in the way when we’re trying to manage. Second, people management isn’t a solo act. It’s important that you have support and buy-in from the members of your firm and that you know how and when to ask for their commitment and other necessary resources.

After you’re familiar with the first two parts, you can continue on to the following two at your own pace and use this book as a reference. When learning to use and master the skills and techniques explained in Chapters 4 through 25, make sure to allocate time (and patience) to practice them. Mastery comes from repetitive mindful practice and from making (and correcting) mistakes. Like any good reference, you can always check back on the skills and the specific challenges discussed in Parts II and III when the need arises.

Finally, don’t be so focused on managing others that you forget to manage yourself. Reread Part IV of this book at least once a year to reflect on your own progress and effectiveness as a manager. There is always room for all of us to improve.

We hope you will share this book and what you learn from it with others. You don't have to have the title "managing partner" or "practice group head" to use this book and become a champion manager. We've found that superb management skills cascade down to all levels of a firm and improve everyone's performance and satisfaction. When this occurs, firms are not just a pleasant place to work, they are also profitable and resilient.

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RESOURCES

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