HOW TO DEVELOP SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH OLDER OFFICE STAFF

NANCY BOWEN, TERESA COREY, ANN HELMS, LYNN HESS, AND MICHELLE LESLIE

You have successfully navigated the rigors of law school, bested the bar exam, and secured your dream job. In your first week, you encounter legal professionals who have been working longer than you have been alive and whose wisdom and insights frequently go untapped—legal assistants, administrative assistants, secretaries, and paralegals, all commonly referred to as staff members. Most young lawyers have never been in a position to delegate work to staff members, and it could be difficult to approach someone who is older than you. Rather than being consumed by hesitancy, allow yourself to look past the age gap and realize that a seasoned staff member is your biggest asset and will benefit you in the long run. Here is a guide to help young attorneys develop a successful relationship with older staff members.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T. The childhood adage “respect your elders” should carry over into your legal career. Remember to give staff members the respect that they deserve. They have been in their position for many years and are familiar with workplace policies, procedures, and culture. Remember, mutual respect will provide you with the benefit of years of experience.

The Only Stupid Question Is the One Not Asked. Do not assume that all you need to know is what you learned in law school; asking questions will allow you to tap into staff members’ experiences. For example, experienced staff members know the idiosyncrasies of the senior partners, where to find templates and forms, and how to complete a complicated court filing. Over the years, staff members also have established relationships and familiarity with court personnel, opposing counsel’s support staff and vendors, and can best determine who to contact to successfully accomplish tasks. Most importantly, staff members have seen countless young lawyers succeed and fail. Asking questions will help you avoid professional pitfalls.

Effective Communication Is Key. Avoid stress or tension with staff members by explaining your expectations and needs early on and often and allow staff members to communicate their expectations as well; communication is a two-way street. When possible, do not wait until the last minute to delegate assignments. In addition, provide advance notice of deadlines, upcoming projects, and your vacation and travel schedule so that staff members can properly plan the work day and keep others informed.

No One Is Perfect. Even the most senior staff member will make mistakes. Keep in mind that most mistakes can be easily corrected. If you discover a mistake or error, work with the staff member to correct the mistake and respectfully ensure that it does not happen again. If the mistake was your fault, never blame the staff member; you risk losing the support of an ally.

Know When to Give Praise. Give staff members credit where credit is due. Just like young lawyers, older staff members appreciate affirmations that they are valued and are doing a great job.

LYNN HESS IS A PARALEGAL AT DICKINSON WRIGHT PLLC IN DETROIT, MICHIGAN.

NANCY BOWEN, TERESA COREY, ANN HELMS, AND MICHELLE LESLIE ARE LEGAL SECRETARIES AT DICKINSON WRIGHT PLLC IN DETROIT, MICHIGAN.