

Law Firm Staff: Are They Treated as Equals?

Article by: Nickie Freedman

I attended an awards party last week honoring the "Best" lawyers in the community. It was a nice affair. One of the winners was a partner at a major national law firm. As I read his profile, I was struck by comments made about him by one of his law partners.

"I think much of what makes [him] a good attorney is that which makes him a good person...[He] genuinely cares about people, which would, of course, include his clients and co-workers. [He] is one of the highest-ranking partners in our firm. But he knows all of the staff ... by name and talks to them on a regular basis. More importantly, he talks to them and everyone else as an equal. I believe his egalitarian views make him more accessible and likeable to clients and juries."

The comments are telling in so many ways:

1. The attorney is a great person and probably great to work with.
2. Why is it unusual that an attorney would 'know all the staff by name and talk to them on a regular basis'?

I believe one of the biggest problems in firms today is the perception of inequality between attorneys and staff. I do staff surveys during training seminars and I ask them what their biggest frustration is. Among the top 3 is 'attorney attitudes toward staff'. In the eyes of many staff members, the attorneys don't treat them as valuable members of a team. Instead, they're thought of as secondary players in the firm.

But let's be honest about this – staff can make or break a firm. However, that's only one part of the equation. For everyone to truly work together, the attorney must think of his staff as a team and treat them as such.

I find it rather sad that knowing all the staff by name and talking to them on a regular basis is considered unusual enough to comment on. In a perfect world, EVERY attorney (especially partners) would act in the same egalitarian fashion. After all, partners own the business. As a business owner, I firmly believe in talking to my staff on a regular basis. I also find it fundamental that a business owner take the time to find out employees' talents and skills so that they're fully utilized in the best manner possible.

It's well known in the human resources field that employees don't stay at a firm because of pay; rather, it's because they feel useful, fulfilled, and valued. It's a shame that many attorneys don't understand this fundamental concept. If they did, I believe that the award-winning attorney's attitude and approach would be the rule rather than the exception.

Copyright 2005 Nickie Freedman is a professional speaker, business consultant and trainer. She is the founder and principal of Legally Large, a training and consulting company dedicated to helping firms rise to their next level by optimizing what they already possess - their people and their processes. Contact her via <http://www.LegallyLarge.com> or 512.791.9644.