

takingthelead

EDITED BY KAREN MACKAY

Having a Winning Reputation With Engaged Employees

LINDA A. KLEIN | It takes only one bad experience to jeopardize a client relationship or to ruin a firm's reputation. And it doesn't matter if that bad experience comes from an interaction with a lawyer or a staff member—your business is bound to feel the result.

When I was a brand-new lawyer and new to town, I opened a bank account at a conveniently located branch. It wasn't long, however, before I closed that account. A bank employee treated me rudely, perhaps because I didn't have a lot of money or perhaps because I looked young. Whatever the reason, I still have a negative feeling about that bank.

You probably have your own story about a business you no longer patronize because an employee made a bad impression. Well, your law firm is equally vulnerable. When a client is treated poorly, whether by a lawyer or a staff member, the client gets a bad impression of the entire firm.

So how can law firms keep this kind of thing from happening? One of the keys involves striving to make your employees feel appreciated and engaged in the firm.

Fostering a Good Environment

We are all responsible for our own actions, of course, but as lawyers and firm leaders we may also be at least partly responsible when a staff member mistreats a client or delivers poor service. It's all about the environment your firm creates and fosters for its workforce.

I experienced this in a striking way when I was a young lawyer. A local attorney prohibited his secretaries from making or accepting personal phone calls on firm time—no exceptions. The secretary working on his very important

appellate brief received an emergency call about her dying parent. He heard her on a personal call and hung up the phone, firmly stating, "No personal calls." She sabotaged his brief by misspelling an important word throughout. Then she filed the brief and never came back to work.

That incident may seem to reflect the extreme end of things. But the fact is that a law office and the often frenzied pace of day-to-day life is stressful on everyone, not just the lawyers. As examples of ways firms can help alleviate some of the stress, here are a few things we do at my firm.

- Once a week we have a massage therapist come with her chair and all staff members can schedule 20-minute sessions at their expense.

- We have cable television in the break room and free soft drinks.

- We offer some enjoyable team events, such as a Chili Cook-off every fall, and we participate as teams in Pink for the Cure, Go Red and other charities.

- We have a regular contest where staff can win gasoline cards for demonstrating exceptional client service.

- In addition, I have found that the biggest stress reducer is offering flexible work schedules when needed. No one benefits when a parent, rushing to daycare, is stressed by the fear of being late to work.

There are a variety of other ways firms might enhance the work environment and reduce stress for employees. But the crux is this: All of us need to recognize that happy employees are better than unhappy employees and that losing good employees is expensive. Two of my colleagues, Caroline Boswell, our firm's human resources director, and Liz McKee, our internal communications manager, have researched the science behind these truisms and shared some of what they've learned with me—most especially that there is a difference between a *satisfied* employee and an *engaged* employee.

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Engaged employees are happier, more loyal, and care more about the firm and its clients. Bottom line: An engaged workforce helps keep clients happy and saves you money.

Focusing on Employee Engagement

To better measure the level of engagement of our workforce, Caroline and Liz worked with the Great Places to Work Institute. The institute, which focuses on creating collaborative workplace relationships, believes that trust equals engagement. Our top leaders understood the link between engagement and client service and encouraged everyone to do the same. In areas where we saw weaknesses, our managers worked to improve. After a few years of focusing on trust and engagement, our firm has been honored with consecutive "Top 100 Companies to Work For" designations by *Fortune* magazine. We were awarded 77th place in 2010 and moved to 50th place this year.

A significant core belief that ultimately led to this honor, we believe,

is communication. Open and honest communication from top leaders, especially in difficult times, is vitally important. Communication between lawyers and staff is equally as important, and all lawyers must keep in mind that their words and actions, and the timing of those words and actions, make a big impact. Obviously, the more camaraderie you build with staff, the harder they'll work for you. Consequently, it's also important that as lawyers we get out of our offices and interact.

To further foster two-way communication, the firm introduced "Daily Docket" meetings, in which all employees, including lawyers, meet in small groups for about 10 minutes every day and we cover one of our firm's service standards. In addition, my team meets in the morning to review what needs to be accomplished that day. We also look ahead to ensure we know each other's schedules so we can plan in advance. Through this communication, we definitely work more effectively and efficiently together, and it has made a notable difference in my practice.

After talking about what we do right,

I asked Caroline and Liz what we could do to improve further. Their response was that staff deserves more feedback. That problem isn't unique to our firm, of course, because lawyers typically are reluctant to give honest feedback to their staff. It is hard to believe, given that lawyers handle difficult client discussions every day, but nonetheless it is generally true. Yet, when lawyers don't communicate with staff, it creates confusion and distrust. So now feedback is frequently discussed during our Daily Dockets, and by training our lawyers to provide feedback, the firm hopes to tackle this barrier.

There is no road map for a plan to make your firm "The Firm" at which everyone wants to work, and just because certain techniques work at one firm, it does not guarantee they will work at your firm. You have to listen to your employees and create programs based on your firm's particular culture. Do that and your staff will definitely appreciate your efforts. In return, they will make you and your clients feel appreciated. Your reputation for client service will be legend. **LP**

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