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Creating a Managing Partner and Administrator Team

BY ROBERT D. FOX AND
JOHN S. KIRK

Special to the Legal

There is no ‘I’ in “teamwork,” but there is a “me” and a “we.” When talking about building an effective managing partner and administrator team, the trick is to cultivate the “we” and eliminate the “me.” In 2010, John Michalik, the former executive director of the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA), undertook a research project that was targeted toward identifying the important role that managing partners and administrators play in making law firms successful. Manko, Gold, Katcher & Fox was selected to participate in Michalik’s research, and we were asked subsequently to participate in a panel discussion, “Creating and Maintaining an Extraordinary Managing Partner/Administrator Team,” at ALA’s annual conference in May 2011. Although MGKF is a boutique environmental and energy law firm, the qualities that a managing partner and administrator team aspire to are the same regardless of the size or geographical location of the firm.

Through this process, we validated what we always believed intuitively were the key qualities essen-



FOX

ROBERT D. FOX is the managing partner and **JOHN S. KIRK** is the chief operating officer for the environmental, energy, land use law and litigation firm of Manko, Gold, Katcher & Fox in Bala Cynwyd, Pa. They can be reached at 484-430-2312 and rfox@mgkflaw.com or 484-430-2313 and jkirk@mgkflaw.com.



KIRK

tial to success in our respective leadership roles within the firm: respect, trust, transparency, candor, shared values, dedication and commitment. A little friendship and sense of humor don’t hurt, either. We learned that together we can be stronger than each of us alone, even though we have different strengths.

DIVISION OF LABOR

The proper division of labor between managing partner and administrator represents the first and most important element of the relationship. As Michalik points out in his book, *The Extraordinary Managing Partner: Reaching the*

Pinnacle of Law Firm Management, managing partners are responsible not only for their own conduct as lawyers in their practice of law, but also for the conduct of nonlawyers who work with them in running the business of the firm. From our experience, in a typical law firm environment, the managing partner plays a key role in setting the direction and vision of the firm and managing all that entails. The administrator plays a major role in challenging, testing and implementing that vision. To make the managing partner/administrator team seamless, then, the key is to establish boundaries and define clearly the respective roles and responsibilities.

RESPECT AND TRUST

In addition to the division of labor, a managing partner and administrator must have unwavering trust in each other’s motives. In our case, we may not always agree with each other, but we understand that our actions are always grounded in the best interests of our firm. This unwavering trust makes for open channels of communication and keeps us from being defensive with each other when there is disagreement. It also helps us understand and complement each other’s skill

set, have confidence in each other's abilities and leave each other alone to carry out specific goals and tasks that have been approved.

In addition to trust, three aspects of respect are essential to this working relationship. We respect each other as people. We respect each other's time and schedule. It is particularly important for the administrator to respect the time of the managing partner, who is frequently challenged with unpredictable client demands. And, finally, it is critical that the managing partner respect the administrator because micro-managing and second-guessing can be crippling to an administrator's efficiency and credibility.

SHARED VALUES AND VISION

Fortunately for us, we share a wonderful friendship and many of the same values, both professionally and personally. This makes for a less stressful working relationship and lends a better understanding to knowing where each person stands on achieving our firm's goals. Being committed to upholding the highest moral and ethical standards and practices in the office and in our personal lives further supports our mutual trust.

To this end, we avoid sending conflicting messages. We know that if we are on the same page, others are more likely to be on that page, too. When we look at things with the

same eyes and ears, we can better keep a pulse on what's going on among the attorneys and staff and minimize morale issues based on misinformation.

This shared approach also leads to transparency in daily interactions. Transparency, in turn, avoids hidden agendas. As an example, if one of us forgets to communicate a decision or a required action to appropriate groups, transparency enables us to acknowledge this oversight and promptly correct it.

MISTAKES WILL HAPPEN

There is an old Chinese proverb: He who covers up his mistakes intends to make some more. Said another way: learn from your mistakes. When acting on assigned tasks and mistakes are made, accept responsibility, both for making a mistake in the first instance and for identifying and overseeing the remedy. Talk about what happened, how it happened and how it impacts the firm. Open problem-solving is a powerful learning tool. In fact, owning up to mistakes can turn into opportunities for doing things better the next time. And, once again, it engenders trust and respect throughout the firm.

COMMITMENT AND COURAGE TO ACT

Winston Churchill once noted that courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it

takes to sit down and listen. Crafting your firm's vision is typically the product of defining your own leadership style and skills, thinking creatively and strategically, being forward-looking, building consensus and establishing concrete action plans, and then holding people accountable for those plans. But building those plans and ideas also comes from effectively listening to and engaging others and distilling and synthesizing wide and varied viewpoints and ideas. You have two ears and one mouth for a reason.

Your firm has entrusted you with significant leadership and management responsibilities, and the firm expects results. That creates challenges and expectations. But you can fulfill those expectations and gain personal satisfaction by being true to the following bard. On the big issues facing the firm, delineate responsibilities, boundaries and levels of autonomy and authority, learn from each other, seek to be respected not beloved, establish trust and transparency and, as John Wooden said, "Be quick, but don't hurry." It will make the challenge of the journey more rewarding. •

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