
GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR EMPLOYEES: LAW FIRM MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES FOR WORKFORCE SUCCESS



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By Dr. Noelle Nelson

Employee motivation is not for sale—it cannot be bought with “employee of the year” awards, holiday gifts, or even year-end bonuses. Motivation, the kind that can influence employees to always give their best, is culture-driven. It needs to be cultivated and solidly supported by law firm management so it becomes part of the firm’s culture. Without a sound understanding of what motivates today’s workforce, a firm may suffer from high absenteeism and turnover, poor client relations, and ineffective lawyer support.

Motivate through Appreciation

The carrot always works better than the stick. The carrot is not just money and promotions. Rather, the carrot is sincere appreciation—telling employees that they matter. When you actively value your employees, they give you value in return. Instead of trying to motivate your employees by endlessly criticizing what they are doing wrong; focus on what they are doing right. Give them every incentive, resource and support to help them do their job. Even when they make a mistake, pinpoint something in their work that they are doing right. You will motivate future good work through appreciation.

You may be thinking that this concept sounds good in theory, but what about in real life? Fortune’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” attract the best workers, increase employee retention rates, and their more friendly work environments help to significantly increase employee productivity. They suffer fewer turnovers too—and turnover is expensive: The American Management Association estimates the cost of replacing an employee at 30 percent of his or her salary. When you discover that U.S. Department

of Labor data shows the number one reason people quit their job is lack of appreciation, and that a recent survey of 10,000 employees from Fortune 1,000 companies reveals lack of recognition was a major reason for leaving a job, you realize that motivating through appreciation isn’t a cute add-on; it’s critical to a thriving workplace.

Your next thought might be “OK, this may be fine for most businesses, but does it work in a busy law office where everyone is under tight deadlines with often demanding attorneys?” Yes, by following these simple techniques.

Manage by Example

When in a leadership or management position at your firm, what you think and feel affects every person who comes in contact with you. You set the tone, you set the pace and you determine what is going to matter and what is not. The trickle-down effect is real. You have enormous impact.

Anne, a paralegal in a large law firm had this to say: “My boss at the last law firm I worked for was a screamer. He was a great rainmaker, and so busy that he always had several of us running ragged for him. That would have been fine—you don’t work at a busy law firm unless you’re willing to work hard. It’s that he never knew how to ask anyone for anything, much less thank you. He’d yell at you instead. He’d want his requests on his desk immediately. And even if you got it to him ahead of schedule, he’d still yell at you ‘Well it’s about time!’ or be on you for the next thing. I got so nervous as a result of all the yelling that I made many more mistakes than I should have. His attitude rubbed off on us (the paralegals and the secretaries who had

to work with him) such that we were constantly irritable with each other, no one ever wanted to help anyone else; you were struggling to keep your own head above water. It got so bad I was diagnosed with ulcers and begged for a transfer.

“The lawyer I work with now is a whole different story. Sure, the pressure is still on to get things done on time, but he asks in normal tone of voice, he doesn’t scream at us, and more often than not, he’ll thank me for the work I’m turning in. My performance review was much better, and I can see it myself: I’m not making stupid mistakes, I can keep up with the workflow, and there isn’t that awful tension between those of us who work on his cases. My ulcers are on the mend, too.”

If firm management and attorneys want staff to have a good attitude, show up on time, approach problems eagerly, and pitch in when needed, they too must have a terrific attitude, show up on time, enthusiastically attack problems and pitch in. You value your staff by being your best for their benefit. They will, with few exceptions, respond in kind. Study after study shows that in the business world, what you give is what you get.

Give Clear Instruction

When you assign a new task, make sure your staff is on the same page. Just saying, “Get ‘Project A’ finished” does not mean your employees know what you mean by “finished,” or how all the pieces of “Project A” fit together. If job duties and goals change, let employees who are involved know the changes and why they are necessary. Workers are remarkably accepting of change when they understand their necessity and remarkably resistant when they do not.

Provide Sufficient Resources

Workers need the tools, training and sufficient time to accomplish their tasks and meet firm goals. Check in with your staff to make sure they are on track. If they are not, it is your responsibility to work with them so they have what they need to do their job successfully.

Pam, a legal secretary, points to a problem she had with her boss. “The lawyer liked to write his openings and other documents in longhand and I would transcribe them,” she says. “That wouldn’t have been too bad, but he’d use abbreviations I wasn’t familiar with. He didn’t like interruptions so I’d figure out what he meant as best I could. I was wrong as often as I was right. He’d cross

out the wrong word and write in the right word. That meant I had to go through the document and make the corrections, which ate up time I needed to have to do other things. Plus, he had a bad habit of not numbering his pages, so I wasted time figuring out the right order of the document. At my review, I was dinged because

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of poor time management. I told our secretarial supervisor what was going on. She spoke with the attorney. He thanked her for bringing the issue to his attention. Sometime later, he gave me like a dictionary of his abbreviations, and instead of giving me loose pages; he gave me the pad of paper with the pages intact. That worked fine. I’m happy, he’s happy, and my reviews are what they should be.”

Follow Through

Live up to your promises. Managers who do what they say and say what they do are effective. People trust them. If you say, “I’ll make sure you get the resources you need,” do so. If you cannot, be truthful about why.

Catch ‘Em in the Act of Doing It Right

So often, we fixate on what employees are doing wrong. However, to get the best out of people, it is far more effective to catch workers in the act of doing something right. Psychology has long proven that people respond far better to positive than to negative feedback. When you consistently let people know what they are doing right, you accomplish several goals:

- Keep workers on the right track since they are likely to repeat behaviors they have been praised for;

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- Increase employees' sense of competence, which in turn, leads to increased competence on the job;
- Raise workers sense of esteem, which feeds motivation and enthusiasm.

Listen to Employees: Complaints and All

Employee complaints are often given little more than lip service. Employees are sometimes fearful that complaints will be held against them so they will often avoid expressing their unhappiness. Such failure to express grievances is detrimental to both the employee and the job. The firm will eventually either lose a good employee or employee morale will be damaged.

Tim, a paralegal talked about his experiences. "I worked at a small firm with an office manager who scheduled vacation time for the staff," he says. "There were certain people who always got the time off they requested, and others of us who were told 'take your vacation when I tell you or you don't get vacation.' Several of us went to the managing partner at different

WHEN YOU ACTIVELY VALUE YOUR EMPLOYEES THEY GIVE YOU VALUE IN RETURN

times to complain. The managing partner would say 'you're right, that's unfair, I'll look into it.' Six months would go by and nothing would happen. I got fed up and quit. I heard through the grapevine that I wasn't the only one to leave. You can't ignore people and expect them to be there for you."

In the end, persistent workplace negativity takes energy from what is important: the smooth running of the firm. This negative attitude bleeds over into every aspect of work. An unhappy employee will not go that extra mile, will not be resourceful, will not be productive, will not give the kind of service or performance that you want and need.

Exclude Employee Opinion at Your Peril

One of the most common reasons for poor morale in the workplace is a manager who makes decisions about employees' work without their input. Any decision that excludes input from the individual who will actually do the work is perceived negatively at best, resisted at worst. Instead, ask employees their opinions. It is a powerful way to let them know you value how they do their job.

Make it easy for employees to express their opinion about workplace policies and procedures. Get employees involved in reviewing old policies or creating new ones. This is not to say that workers should run the show—that is not appropriate. Rather, this approach acknowledges that employees commit more easily and fully to decisions in which they have a role. When you are considering changes in hours, overtime, benefits, dress code, location of workspaces, parking arrangements, the work environment—anything that impacts workers—find out how employees feel about these changes so that you can address problems before they arise. And, of course, let employees know how much you value and appreciate their input.

When employees see how their ideas are being used, when they are rewarded and applauded for their contributions to the greater good, they do not end up frustrated and angry; they become engaged, enthusiastic and happy.

Easy-to-Implement Employee Appreciation Techniques

Humans are starved for recognition, for genuine appreciation of our talents and skills. The enormous success of TV reality shows is largely predicated on our need to be valued and rewarded for our good works. Reasons for an award can be as varied as receiving a glowing client thanks, pitching in to help without being asked or mentoring a new hire with graciousness and good humor. There is no need to restrict appreciation to that annual awards banquet where too few receive the company's applause for too few reasons.

Awards can be simple: a sincere "thank you," applause, a humorous "gold star," or a "congrats!" email or card. Of course, awards can be elaborate: a cruise, a dinner for two, tickets to a cherished ball game, and of course, that ever appreciated award—cash.

How do you encourage and support the winners at your firm? Consider special events or days when you

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should be procedures in place to make sure that all young lawyers learn from existing rainmakers by attending pitches, rainmaking events and meetings with prospective clients and referral sources.

5. All job descriptions include supporting rainmaking.

Every person in any position in a firm can support rainmaking. Receptionists, secretaries and administrators often bring great value to rainmaking and should be made aware that it is a part of their job and their compensation will be affected by their participation.

PROOF

Proof is management acting in accordance with the Values, Vision and Procedures. Proof is the most important aspect of creating a rainmaking culture and it is where many firms fail. Management may talk a good game but never follow through. Here are some examples of rainmaking proof:

1. Management participates.

Too often, management talks about the importance of rainmaking but fails to personally participate. Management must demonstrate their support by doing. They should act as examples and set the standards.

2. Management makes rainmaking accessible.

The firm should implement a variety of activities to which

all lawyers can invite their contacts. A holiday party and a few seminars per year will give the attorneys an easy and appropriate reason to reach out to their contacts. The firm should send e-mail updates, implement Webcasts and maintain a blog.

3. Management demonstrates appreciation.

Of course successful rainmaking should enjoy increased compensation. But, appreciation doesn't necessarily mean financial. A personal congratulation is a meaningful reward. Management should be sure to acknowledge all rainmaking efforts and not just bringing in new clients.

CONCLUSION

Creating a rainmaking culture is no easy task. It requires clear thinking and consistent implementation. And, law firm administrators are an important participant in the development and implementation. Without the culture, it is easy for lawyers to stay stuck in old behaviors. However, if the values are sound, the vision is clear, the procedures are reasonable, and management acts responsibly, lawyers will feel more comfortable participating in rainmaking. And, when they participate, there's a good chance they will succeed.

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deliberately celebrate your employees, teams, managers, vendors, even clients. Make lists of the accomplishments, efforts, situations and people that you could reward. Get creative with how these different situations can be celebrated. Experience shows that employee commitment to the workplace greatly increases following meaningful reward and celebrations.

Give a Cherished Reward: Time Off

As workers seek a more balanced work-life ratio, time off becomes an increasingly valuable reward, especially at a busy law firm where long hours can be the norm. Time off can be used as a reward in a multitude of ways—individually and spontaneously, as in “you’ve done a great job with the Jones case, take the rest of the day off,” or in a more scheduled fashion where employees earn time off by completing projects or tasks ahead of schedule, or are awarded in recognition of excellent performance.

With a little creativity, law firm management can utilize a host of appreciation methods to increase employee engagement and motivation to increase the firm's productivity and, ultimately, profitability. Remember, your efforts are all based on giving good employees what they really want—the clarity, tools and resources to do their job, to be heard on matters that are important to them, and to be appreciated, valued and rewarded for their hard work.

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