



CATCH THEM DOING SOMETHING RIGHT!

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The really amazing thing about people is that they tend to reach toward our expectations of them, much like a plant leaning toward the light. If our expectations are unrealistically high, some will be challenged to rise to the occasion, but we risk that others who tend toward self-defeatism or are non-competitive by nature may be inclined to bow out of the process altogether when faced with an unachievable goal. The downside is that when we communicate low expectations, people will tend to under-perform in an (unconscious?) effort to meet those expectations. It can become a Catch-22: low expectations or belief in a person's abilities often results in performance which reinforces those low expectations.

How do you get the best possible performance from your employees? How do you motivate them to reach beyond their limits; to dig down and find the inner resources and strength to seek out and conquer new challenges? Well, before I start to address solutions, let me back up and talk about a mounting challenge you're going to face in this arena. And let me preface it with a reminder that I only report the trends, folks, I don't make them!

For firms in high population areas—Dauphin, Allegheny and Philadelphia counties and surrounds in PA—you have already started to note the trend affecting employee availability and quality. I know that because attorneys and administrators in those areas have been calling the hot line and emailing me to ask, "Is it me, or is this really happening?" What are we talking about? The fact that there is an increasing deterioration in the quality level of candidates for support staff. The cream of the crop are reaching higher on the employment ladder, leaving much slimmer pickings than ever before to fill the ranks. Today's grads can't spell, barely type, don't do shorthand, have no decent command of grammar, can barely add and subtract, and have no office skills to speak of.

What are the results of this trend? Law firms must allocate greater resources than ever before in training and mentoring in order to bridge the gap between skills and needs. People are your greatest asset in a law firm.

It is within people that the firm's intellectual capital resides. Law firms are people-intensive environments. And now let's return to my introductory comments to put this in perspective.

I discovered long ago that the inevitable success of many employees depended on the quality of their training and orientation at the firm. It takes only a few seconds in some cases for people to form an opinion about another's abilities. Lawyers in particular seem to size someone up and form an opinion about their "value" in about 6 seconds flat. Thereafter, it is almost impossible to improve the opinion.

What that always meant to me when I managed inside firms was that a high quality training and orientation program was necessary for a majority of support staff to succeed. If they were unprepared when they "hit the firing line" the resulting opinions which were formed might doom them to failure, despite considerable talent and potential.

What feedback do we normally provide staff? Well, when they are doing their job as they should, we usually provide no feedback at all. After all, that is what they're there for, isn't it? But when a mistake is made we jump on it. After all, corrective action is called for. We want to know who made the mistake, and how it got made, so we can make sure it doesn't happen again. In our zeal to take corrective action, we sometimes blow things out of proportion, don't we?

Let me share with you my three Rules of Communication. I can't remember where I heard them originally, but they made such an impression on me that I typed them in a big font size and tacked them on my wall, where they have remained for years as a constant reminder. If you want to get top performance out of your staff, these three Rules will stand you in good stead.

RULE #1: If you tell them, they will forget.

RULE #2: If you remind them, they will resent.

RULE #3: If they overhear you telling someone else, they will remember forever.

The meaning of each of these Rules is simple. First, people tend to forget a lot of what you tell them. It doesn't help to nag, e.g. repeat yourself. It will only build resentment. If you want to get their attention and make a



lasting impression, look for an opportunity to catch someone doing exactly what you want. And then praise them publicly for it where others can overhear it. Those who overhear will remember that doing the right thing, even if it is only a normal part of the job, brings praise. And they will aspire to mimic the behavior.

Here's a perfect example. You tell staff that getting the work done for the client is priority one, and that sometimes they will need to stay to help make that happen. Yet sometimes you come out of your office at 5:05, having told your secretary or paralegal that you're working on something that has to go out, and lo and behold they've left. Frustrating. In all likelihood you will have some words to say on that the following day. And in all likelihood you will do it publicly so others can be "warned" about such unreliable behavior. On the other hand, if they stay, you probably say nothing, because that's what they were supposed to do.

Let's change that behavior. First, if your secretary didn't stay, talk to her privately in your office, out of earshot of others. On the other hand, let's say that your secretary stayed. Yes, she was supposed to do that under the circumstances. You have "caught" her doing something RIGHT. The next day you should say, loud enough for everyone close by to overhear, "Sue, you were a lifesaver last night when you stuck around so we could get that document done and out the door for the client. I really appreciate that you helped me meet the client's deadline and look good. We made a great team. Thanks!" Those who overhear will "remember" the point without additional reminder, and will work to achieve the same praise.

Always criticize privately to avoid the resentment in Rule #2. Always praise publicly to achieve the effect in Rule #3.

All of the attorneys and any managers in your office should be on the lookout to catch people doing things RIGHT. Not extraordinary, although certainly that should be praised and rewarded. Just catch them doing what is expected of them. Coming in on time every day. Having perfect attendance. Taking a complicated yet accurate phone message. And so forth. And then publicly praise the accomplishment so that others can overhear.

This method will produce far better results than catching people doing the WRONG thing, and correcting them publicly. Because if dressed down in public they will resent the embarrassment. And they will become demoralized. When that happens, their confidence is shaken. Then they start to make stupid mistakes. They start to second guess themselves, and



make bad judgment calls. They lose the ability to think autonomously and be a proactive problem solver.

Let's go back to my statement about criticizing privately. While that's necessary, I would do you a disservice if I didn't point out that criticism is fairly non-productive. It's part of the blame game. Better to just calmly explore factually what led to the situation, and offer some suggestions for different or more appropriate outcomes the next time, or ask the staff member to consider it and submit to you possible alternative courses of action given similar facts and circumstances.

No doubt about it, the quality of staff is decreasing. Your firm will have to make up for that with some additional training and orientation. But if you want to make those lessons "stick," practice the 3 Rules of Communication, and be on the look-out for opportunities to catch people doing things RIGHT.

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