

Dimensions of Effective Leadership

For Members of the Association of Legal Administrators

It was my pleasure to attend the ALA Regional Educational Conference in New Orleans in October of 2004. The keynote presentation was "Dimensions of Effective Leadership," presented by Laura Stack, MBA, CSP. Laura is "The Productivity Pro!" She is an employee-productivity expert who caters to high-stress industries such as the legal profession. She is also the author of "Leave the Office Early."

As legal administrators and managers, it is our job to figure out how to support our respective law firms in the ultimate goals of bringing in more revenue and saving dollars. Obviously, we can increase revenues by getting more clients and expanding the services rendered to current clients. To save on expenses, we can cut staff, salaries and benefits, but this could actually decrease the quality of our services to our clients. Instead we should work towards increasing productivity within our firm. However, we must first increase our own productivity and then move on to improve productivity firmwide.

To begin the process, we should identify the things in our environment that slow productivity down. Through this process, we will discover which of those things are within our control and which are not. If it is in your control, set out steps to implement the change, who you will communicate with, who you will gain support from, and a date by which you will publicize your intentions. If the slowdown is from a source we cannot control, decide if it is something/someone we can influence. If so, determine who we will gain support from and a date by which we will direct the influence.

Sometimes, there are factors affecting our firms that we can neither control nor influence. Then, we must decide what we are willing to take ownership in? Is there something we can do differently to develop a reputation as a problem-solver instead of a finger-pointer? Where are you willing to initiate improvements?

Take a piece of paper and make a list of internal and external "speed bumps" that keep you from doing what you know you should be doing every day. Internal potential problems could be:

- Improper delegation
- Disorganization
- Procrastination
- Interruptions
- Incorrect prioritization
- Multi-tasking
- Excessive socializing
- Lack of planning, tardiness
- Inability to concentrate
- External potential problems could be:
 - Communication
 - Systems problems
 - Decision making
 - Strategic planning
 - Mistake correction
 - Undefined roles and responsibilities
 - Too many meetings
 - Drop-in visitors
 - Lack of teamwork
 - Politics

After these "speed bumps" are identified, we can then begin to systematically eliminate them.

A big drain on productivity in any organization is how we communicate internally. There is generally little or no protocol on when we should call a meeting, when we should send an e-mail, or when we should page an individual. As administrators and managers, we should put some thought into our communication system and set standards. Then, we need to educate individuals within the firm as to what the standards are and how to select the best channel of communication. We can then determine bottlenecks in the system – where does communication get slowed down within our firm. Sometimes our own self-inflicted bottlenecks can cause a crisis. As managers, we need to identify where we can change processes in our firms to eliminate the bottlenecks – determine how we can keep the process moving.

One of the keys to improving our productivity is to reduce drop-in visitors. How many times a day do you get interrupted by “drop-in” visitors? Just think of the amount of time that those visits take out of your total work week. We must learn to set aside “down time” and schedule regular check-in times. Further, we must be honest when we are in the middle of something and learn to deflect low-priority interruptions with alternate scheduling. If someone says “do you have a minute,” let them know when it would be convenient for you to discuss the matter with them at a later date/time.

Another important issue affecting productivity in our firms is how to keep your staff from burning out. In order to do that, we must reduce “desk rage” and irritations by:

- Ensure your firm is adequately staffed
- Give employees enough room to work
- Try to reduce noise levels through higher partitions
- Encourage employees to carpool and use public transportation
- Give employees places and programs to decompress
- Rethink your dress code – perhaps casual dress has led to casual behavior
- Hold a seminar on manners
- Involve HR or evaluate people on civility
- Confront employee aggression so it does not affect others
- Encourage EAP programs and counseling to help employees deal with stress
- Encourage playfulness and humor in the workplace

By encouraging playfulness and humor in our firms, we will not only increase productivity, but improve the flow of communication, improve morale, reduce absenteeism, enhance problem solving skills, diffuse anger and tension, build stronger teams and reduce medical costs.

For more information on this topic, you may contact Laura Stack directly at laura@theproductivitypro.com or visit her website at www.theproductivity.com.

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