

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT

Cultivating an Accountable Office

Accountability breeds trust and productivity. Here's how to make it happen at your office.

Attorneys are constantly busy. If they're not meeting with clients, working on cases or going to court, they're running their firms and trying to bring in new business. For these reasons, it's critical that support staff is on the same page as their bosses and dedicated to the success of their firms.



KYLIE ORA LOBELL
Freelance Writer

“Accountability for us does not mean a million policies, forms or meetings. It means doing great work, being a great team player, learning from mistakes and contributing to the core values of the firm.”

NICOLE AUERBACH
Founding Partner, Valorem
Law Group

That's where employee accountability comes into play.

Oftentimes, the word “accountability” gets a bad rap, but it's actually a positive thing, says Allan D. Koltin, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Koltin Consulting Group. “It's a process and system whereby leadership helps associates to achieve their goals by working with them, both formally and informally, throughout the year to achieve those goals.”

It's important to highlight what accountability really means to get employees on board. If everyone is given responsibility, they have the power to achieve their own ambitions as well as fulfill the mission of the team as a whole.

“Accountability for us does not mean a million policies, forms or meetings,” says Nicole Auerbach, Founding Partner at Valorem Law Group. “It means doing great work, being a great team player, learning from mistakes and contributing to the core values of the firm.”

To cultivate employee accountability at your own firm, you first need to determine what workers believe their responsibilities are and what you expect from them.

WHAT EMPLOYEES NEED TO BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR

In any office, employees should be held accountable for sticking to their schedules, completing their given tasks, looking and acting professional, treating their coworkers with respect, and being team players.

At a law firm in particular, employees need to uphold confidentiality and “be able to intelligently prioritize their workload, especially in a busy firm where a non-attorney may be answering to



multiple partners and staff attorneys," says Peter A. Johnson, Esq., Founder of Law Practice Consultants, LLC.

Koltin says it's crucial that associates have goals for realization, billable time, new business and networking, and professional growth in their areas.

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"People who feel they are part of what's going on and who trust that their voices will be heard will be a more effective part of the organization."

PETER A. JOHNSON

Founder, Law Practice Consultants, LLC



HOW TO ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEE ACCOUNTABILITY

Everyone at the firm wants to feel as if they're a part of something bigger. They crave a purpose, and to be involved with the team.

"If we can activate a higher level of engagement and motivation on the front end, then accountability becomes a much easier task," says David Freeman, CEO of David Freeman Consulting. "People don't like doing things they don't care about doing, so before you can ask someone to be accountable, we want them to buy in to the goal."

Johnson suggested that firm leaders encourage "employees to assume ownership of their area of responsibility, [which] goes a long way toward getting buy-in on accountability. Having some leeway in how assignments are completed is one way to inspire initiative, so long as the work product is good."

Individuals who are higher up in the firm should be willing to mentor administrative workers as well. According to Johnson, this is invaluable for a younger employee.

"Too many law firms invest in mentoring for attorneys but ignore others who make an important contribution to the firm. Mentoring can be effective across the board with paralegals and support staff."

Another useful step leaders can take is making themselves available to their employees. Auerbach says that at Valorem Law Group, they have one-on-one meetings to discuss issues they may want to raise, and "collabostorms," a cross between brainstorming and collaborations, which involve all staff to strategizing on issues for their clients.

"If we can activate a higher level of engagement and motivation on the front end, then

"We have created an atmosphere that is open and collegial, and this in turn fosters dedicated and engaged employees."

Compensation should include a bonus or incentive that rewards associates for achieving their objectives throughout the year.

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DAVID H. FREEMAN,
JD

Founder, Law Firm Culture
Shift



“As you can imagine, it can be quite difficult to get associates to be held accountable for a group of goals when all the firm says that’s important (via compensation) is billable hours,” says Koltin. “The worst thing that can happen is to give associates goals, not hold them accountable, and then have them be unhappy or surprised at the end of the year when bonuses and/or compensation increases come out.”

ACCOUNTABILITY STARTS AT THE TOP

If you want employees to buy in and start being held accountable, management has to lead by example. They must show that they’re dedicated to their jobs and the firm, as well as their employees’ needs. Management needs to have guidelines, but not be too rigid with the rules.

“A firm that runs fast and loose with the rules certainly won’t inspire its employees to toe the line and act responsibly,” says Johnson. “At the same time, if firm leadership is too buttoned down, it may suppress and discourage individual initiative. It’s a real balancing act.”

Johnson says that communication is the key to ensuring that accountability is upheld. It all starts with laying out a clear job description before taking on a new hire, and then giving employees a handbook for firm policies best practices.

Whether it’s written or verbal, “Firm management must be open and honest in downward communication, and open and receptive to upward communication. People who feel they are part of what’s going on and who trust that their voices will be heard will be a more effective part of the organization,” says Johnson.

Leadership should understand the strengths of each employee and how they can help them realize their goals. They should be open to listening and not just speak down to their support staff.

“Find what is important to each person, and then find ways to align their interests and passion with the needs of the firm,” says Freeman.

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ALLAN D. KOLTIN

CEO, Koltin Consulting
Group



At a firm where accountability is emphasized, every employee feels like he or she counts and is contributing to the firm’s goals. There is nothing wrong with holding employees accountable or asking more of them than simply doing their jobs. In the end, accountability benefits everybody at the firm.

“Accountability can often be misunderstood to mean being watched over or checking off all the boxes you have to check to be a good employee, like punching a clock,” says Auerbach. “In reality, in an environment where people and the work they do is valued and appreciated, accountability merges into productivity and maintaining a constant level of excellence.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kylie Ora Lobell is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles. She covers legal issues, blogs about content marketing, and reports on Jewish topics. She’s been published in *Tablet Magazine*, *NewsCred*, *The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles* and *CMO.com*.

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