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Helping Legal Project Teams Succeed

Most law offices are big believers in the power of teamwork. Project teams are commonly used by firms to handle complex or long-term legal matters. A team approach can also be used by legal administrators to focus the efforts of support staff on operational projects of high importance.

As managers are well aware, project teams have the potential to produce better work and develop more effective solutions than individuals working independently. A Japanese proverb captures the essence of the teamwork advantage: “None of us is as smart as all of us.”

But effective teams don’t just happen by bringing people together. It is up to the manager or leader who forms a team to guide it to a positive outcome. Here are some suggestions for setting the stage for successful collaboration:

Create a shared vision. Successful teams are unified by a clear sense of mission. Team members must understand why the team was formed, what its goals are and what needs to be done to achieve them. Take time to formulate a clear statement of purpose, and ensure that everyone understands and buys into it. It is this shared vision that binds a team together even when obstacles or internal disagreements arise.

Clarify roles. To avoid any confusion, put details of what individual roles involve in writing. You’ll also want to guide the team in establishing processes and protocols that clarify how they will work together. Areas to address include guidelines for conducting meetings, exchanging information, making decisions and resolving conflicts. In particular, be sure to establish procedures for intervening if team members aren’t living up to their responsibilities.

Encourage equal participation. Because teams often bring people from different work areas and experience levels together, it’s not uncommon for quieter or less experienced members to be overshadowed by more assertive participants. While top performers may naturally gravitate to the more difficult or high-profile tasks, make sure that other team members don’t feel squeezed out. To ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute, you may need to draw out certain individuals and ask for their input, especially in meetings, or steer specific aspects of the project their way.

Develop appropriate rewards. Creating reward mechanisms that support team initiatives can be tricky because appraisal and merit systems are traditionally based on individual performance. Firms that want to use a more team-oriented work approach should aim to incorporate reward mechanisms that give proper weight to both individual

accomplishment and group success. Challenge team members to develop their own system of rewards as well (within your firm's parameters, of course). Also, keep in mind that nonmonetary rewards can often be as effective as those that are monetary.

Recognize when a team *isn't* the best approach. Although teams are often the best way to tackle a business problem, there are certain functions or challenges that may not benefit from a team approach. Sometimes this is obvious, but not always. Part of your challenge as a legal administrator is recognizing when a project team is the best way to proceed. Keep an open mind as you analyze which functions or project phases lend themselves to a team effort and which are better handled by individuals. For example, a new information systems implementation might require the full attention of an IT manager with legal support staff brought together for input only at certain decision points. Sometimes it's helpful to elicit employees' suggestions about which tasks are best handled with a team approach.

Stay positive. Whether legal administrators themselves serve as team leaders or tap someone else for that role, they still have a responsibility to facilitate the team process. This requires keeping the group motivated, especially when it encounters setbacks. Try to remain positive, but don't brush aside problems that develop. Help the team overcome any obstacles and move forward. Remind team members, too, how important their success is to the firm.

It takes skill to oversee teams so that both individual members and the group as a whole are engaged and productive. By laying the proper groundwork for collaboration and intervening when necessary to help teams navigate a rough patch, you can offer a work group the support they need to live up to their promise.

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