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Morale Busters to Avoid in Troubled Times

Like other businesses, law firms are feeling the effects of the struggling economy. Many have been forced to reduce staff in recent months in response to slowing service demand. As a result, law offices may be stretched thin and employee anxiety may be running high. In this environment, it may be necessary for your firm to renew its focus on maintaining employee morale and engagement.

While it's true that many people feel fortunate to have a stable position today, if employees feel their work is undervalued, they may remain with the firm through the downturn but plan for an exit as soon as the economy shows renewed vigor. And, of course, top performers with sought-after expertise typically can find opportunities in any economy. These employees are key to your firm's long-term success.

As you help lead your law office through difficult times, here are some common management mistakes to avoid:

Clamming up. Open communication with employees is vital to having an effective and motivated staff, but employees especially crave information during anxiety-filled times. Try to do a better job of keeping them informed about what's going on within the firm, and don't ignore the rumor mill. For example, if you're having to cut expenses, explain to them that this is a way of ensuring that you can protect the jobs of current staff.

Talking to employees about the effect of the downturn on your firm can also help them feel they have some measure of control over the situation. By informing them of the challenges you face – for instance, the need to find some additional savings opportunities – you can put their talents to work solving problems. In the process, you'll increase employee engagement and foster more of a “we're all in this together” mentality.

Setting a bad example. Legal administrators are sure to bear much of the stress of the troubled economy because of their position within their firms. It's important to be a good role model for employees, however, by remaining calm. If staff members see you grouching about the business outlook or worrying aloud about cash flow, they'll become concerned about their job security.

Also, if your firm is taking steps to rein in costs, don't exempt yourself from making sacrifices. Employees will be more accepting of cutbacks or salary freezes if they know that their managers are also affected.

Adopting a recession mindset. Although your firm may be hunkering down to ride out the economic storm, don't allow the atmosphere to be one of gloom and doom. Even if you're making budget cuts, this doesn't mean you can suspend praise and rewards to your team members. There are plenty of no-cost or low-cost incentives, but you may need to

become more creative in how you recognize staff members. Instead of taking them out to lunch at a nice restaurant, for instance, consider inviting team members for a leisurely brown-bag lunch outside on a nice day. Or, perhaps, you can reward them for their dedication by letting them leave a couple of hours early on a Friday.

Making work mission impossible. Sure, everyone needs to work a little harder in the current environment, but this doesn't mean it's acceptable to push employees to the breaking point. Layoffs and budget cuts may mean that one staff member is doing the job of two, or even three, people. If this is the case, help employees decide which duties are mission-critical, and which you can put on hold or delegate, bringing in temporary professionals if necessary. There are legal specialists, from legal secretaries and paralegals to project attorneys, available at all skill and experience levels through specialized legal staffing firms. This will help you avoid overwhelming valued team members or setting them up for failure.

Although law firms are understandably focused on getting through the challenges of the here and now, keep in mind that everyone needs something to look forward to, and your staff members are no exception. When promising developments occur, communicate these to employees and discuss future opportunities that are likely to be there for them when the economy improves. Painting a rosier picture of what's ahead – as long as it's sincere and plausible – is an effective way to buoy morale and improve retention.

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