

## **Being Accepted As Your Firm's First Administrator**

By Gary Smith

Proving your worth as you begin with a new firm can be difficult. It was doubly challenging to me since not only was I new to the firm and to legal administration but I was also the firm's first full-time non-lawyer administrator. The advice and suggestions that follow are based on my experience, but I feel they are pertinent to any administrator starting anew.

You're the new kid on the block and it's a rough neighborhood. Some of the partners see you as just another layer of overhead and most of the employees see you as a potential hatchet man/woman there to enforce, watch over and interfere. How do you establish your value to these two groups, each of which you must work with but who have very different expectations and apprehensions about your coming? One apprehension that they all have in common is that those things that work reasonably well now will be disturbed by this intrusion on the status-quo – you. In order to be accepted you have to allay their fears, and show them that you can make things work better.

The amount of authority and responsibility delegated to you will grow as you demonstrate your abilities. It is important, however, to define the extent of your authority and responsibility early, otherwise confusion will result in inaccurate or unrealistic expectations. Also, since authority is the tool by which responsibility is carried out, the level of authority and the level of responsibility need to be closely matched. The degree of authority you have needs to be communicated to others in the firm through the unconditional, visible support of the partners in power. This subject should be discussed before your first day on the job.

One of the first things you need to do is to learn the physical layout of the office. Get a copy of the floor plan for the office – walk around, look in closets and cabinets in common areas. Find out where supplies and equipment are kept. It's okay to ask where supplies are, but usually you will be told where things should be and often it's only by digging around that you find where they really are. A floor plan with all of the employees' names written in, to show their office or work station, is a big help when you are trying to learn 40 or more new names in a short time.

Get copies of any written documents about the firm such as marketing brochures, employee manuals, firm policy statements, etc. If there are no formal documents, find someone who has a file on all internal memos for the last few years. Often office policy is expressed a little bit at a time in such memos.

You're going slow at first learning about the firm and its policies, procedures and systems. This is good, but if you've got the drive necessary to be a good administrator, you need some real work to do while you are going through the learning process. It's a good idea to have some specific tasks to focus on during the initial period when you are

learning your way around the firm and not being particularly productive. My background is as a CPA, therefore, when I started my job, I could immediately begin work on firm financial, payroll and tax matters. In addition, we had four new employees join the firm within three weeks of my hiring, so I was kept busy by having offices painted, ordering furniture and supplies and doing other tasks associated with preparing for new employees.

I also requested that the managing partners give me a list of projects that they would like me to work on during the next six to 12 months. Then, if I had slack time because I needed management approval to go any further on a particular task and all of the managing partners were in trial or depositions, I could go to that list to keep myself busy until they became available. Of course slack time was a problem only in the first few weeks. Once you have demonstrated that you are competent and hard working, the work will find you, you won't have to look for it.

Law firms, like the law itself, are built on precedence. Consider carefully before making changes. Take time to learn the systems, rules and procedures in place. This includes written and formal practices as well as the unwritten and unspoken ones (which are no less important). Let me give you an example. As I mentioned earlier, one of my first tasks was to prepare for four new employees. I was told what furniture to order and what offices were empty and available. I thought that I would need to have those offices painted and the new furniture delivered to them, but it wasn't that simple. Some of our furniture had been with the firm for a number of years and the unwritten rule was that as new furniture was purchased, the new items were to be offered to the associates with the most seniority, and the employees joining the firm would get the old furniture. Similarly, as offices became vacant, if an associate wanted to change to a more desirable office, they could as long as the move was made before the new employees arrived. In the end, twice as many offices were painted and twice as much furniture was moved than I originally thought would be necessary because of the trading up among associates.

Roll up your shirtsleeves – show that you can work as well as supervise when necessary. People really do prefer to be led by example. If you want those you are supervising to work hard, it's much easier if you are working hard yourself. It's okay to help move furniture for that new lawyer joining the firm, make a delivery when the messenger is out and the delivery is urgent and show that you don't feel anyone's job is below you. Remember though, you can't be all things to all people. It is neither possible nor effectual for you to do everything – you must delegate.

Be responsive when people ask for your help. They may be hesitant to do so at first and if you are not responsive, they will soon stop asking. Your job is to see that things run smoothly and efficiently. You need people to let you know about problems before they grow, and people will only do that if they get results. Be prompt in answering any request, even if it's only to say that nothing can be done at this time. Partners expect, and should get, your immediate attention to their requests.

It is important to communicate your progress on a regular basis. Maybe it is a report to the partners at each partnership meeting. Perhaps it is a monthly administrative update in memo format. The method may vary but the result should be that the partners know what you have accomplished.

In a nutshell, here is my advice to the new administrator: Learn as much as possible about your firm, where things are, who does what, what systems are in place, what works well and what doesn't. Have some specific daily, weekly or monthly duties for which you will be immediately responsible and get a list of longer term projects to work toward up front. Go slow at first as far as suggesting changes is concerned. Be prompt in responding to people's requests, whether it's the copy clerk or the founding partner. Communicate your achievements to the partners regularly. Lastly, show people that you want to be part of the team, that you are there to help, not hinder.

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