

building better relationships



Developing strong professional relationships with colleagues will ultimately increase legal administrators' success, advance their careers, and drive profitability for their firms.

BY LINDA L. HARDENSTEIN

As firms merge and expand, the “one firm” mantra is commonplace. Corporations have long wanted to “flatten silos” and make it easier for people in different departments to work together. Our global economy and technology makes it easy to communicate, and the expectation now is that employees in multiple offices will come together to solve problems and improve operations. Whether you are an administrator in a law firm with multiple offices, or you are in a corporate legal department, developing relationships with colleagues can increase your success, improve your career, and add value for your employer.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Carol and Diane work at a large firm – and how they react to the firm’s annual administrators meeting couldn’t be more different. Like most highly charged administrators, Diane works hard to meet demands, keeps her nose to the grindstone, and is constantly putting out fires. She believes in the “one firm concept.” She also likes to get things done and believes that chit-chatting with other administrators cuts into valuable productive time. Carol, however, views the annual meeting as an opportunity to meet colleagues. To her, building relationships is as important as completing tasks. She invites people from other offices to stop by when they are in town. She asks questions with genuine interest and curiosity to find out what colleagues do and how they can work together.

When the firm’s chairman wanted a leader for a highly visible, cross-functional, cross-office team on attorney retention, which administrator got the nod – Carol or Diane? Carol was the natural choice because she was known for getting the job done and being able to work effectively with people. According to *Developing Business Leaders for 2010*, a publication from The Conference Board, “one of the four key essential leadership roles is relationship/network builder,” and Carol knows how to do it, hands down.

LEVERAGING PERSONAL NETWORKS

According to an article in the MIT/Sloan Management Review, “what really distinguishes high performers from the rest of the pack is their ability to maintain and leverage personal networks. The most effective create and tap large, diversified networks that are rich in experience and span all organizational boundaries.” The most successful legal administrators will acknowledge this fact and cultivate stronger relationships with colleagues in different offices. Consider these key steps:

- **Assess relationships.** First, identify your relationships at work. Do people at all levels of the organization know you and what you do? Do you know all of the people whose work intersects with yours? Who has worked with you whom you don’t know very well? Who just joined the firm? Once you have identified whom you know, you can determine whom you need to know.
- **Develop relationships.** Statistics show it takes about six to eight interactions before a relationship forms. The more interactions you have with someone, the more that person gets to know you, what you do, and how you do it. How can you increase your interactions with key people to deepen and widen your internal network?



Even though it may seem to you that the efforts take time away from completing tasks, building relationships with colleagues across the organization will be invaluable to your career and your firm.

- **Build trust.** Trust occurs when you demonstrate your character, competence, and follow-through. People who trust you are more willing to put in a good word for you, promote you and your talents, and position you for success. Whom do you need to build a trusting relationship with? Are there relationships you need to repair?
- **Get known.** Think about the qualities you possess and consciously build your reputation by demonstrating your talent. To gain visibility, volunteer for committees, help plan the holiday party, and show your citizenship whenever you can. Make sure your reputation (your personal brand) says what you want it to say. For what do you want to be known?

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Administrators can be instrumental in creating work environments that make it easy to build relationships by:

- **Advocating for face-to-face meetings.** Encourage your firm to have at least one in-person meeting per year for administrative staff. Build in social time to give people a chance to talk. Assign seating and have attendees move at least once during the meeting so they get to know someone new. Design small-group activities. Pair guests with a home office host/hostess to go to lunch or have coffee.
- **Teaching relationship skills.** With four different generations in the workplace relating to people, working together productively and civilly is required more now than ever before. Topics to consider for training sessions are networking, generational differences, personal branding, conflict resolution, team building, and communication skills.
- **Enhancing communication.** Virtual teams – group united principally through technological tools – are becoming the norm in many large firms. Amy Zinman, Director of Professional Development at Nixon Peabody LLP, supervises

a virtual team and has an unwritten rule: “If you are going to send an e-mail of more than just a few lines, pick up the phone instead and call.” She’s found this practice helps communication and establishes collegiality. Patton Boggs LLP uses virtual teams to gather input and to embrace differences across offices. The firm has invested in software that helps people stay connected. “Technology contributes in positive ways,” according to Therese Gross, Chief Human Resources Officer. “We have intranet pages that allow team members to go to a site and post communication threads, share flow charts, graphs, and articles. Our ‘One Firm, One Community’ site links to firm resources and streaming video announcements that are part of a collaborative internal site.”

- **Sharing responsibility.** The responsibility for building relationships rests equally on the shoulders of administrators and directors in the home office. Administrators in the field “have a responsibility to do their homework. The last thing you want is a reputation as someone who asks for help without first trying to find the answer,” said Legal Administrator Donna Brooks, who works in the branch office of a national insurance company. “If you’re known for doing your homework, headquarters staff will respect you, know your question is legitimate, and will be responsive, allowing you to get your job done and build trusting relationships at the same time,” Added Patricia A. Lauwers, a Legal Administrator at a large U.S. law firm, “A director at headquarters who recognizes geographical differences, listens, and will go to bat for you can make all the difference to an administrator’s success.”
- **Setting an example.** Make it a point when visiting an office to reach out and connect with others. Carol sets a goal to meet two or three people every time she visits another office. She invites colleagues to have coffee or asks if she

can stop by and introduce herself. Conversation starters she uses are asking what a typical day is like, identifying projects in common, providing tips to solve a problem, and asking the best way to stay in touch – via e-mail or phone.

BENEFITS OF STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Building strong relationships can benefit administrators by providing:

- **Access.** Your network can be invaluable if it helps you to complete an important project or task. If you have ever worked late to meet a deadline and had a copy machine jam, you know how valuable a relationship with the head of the copying department can be.
- **Intelligence.** If you're new, relationships with "people in the know" can provide important information on the organization's culture and unarticulated criteria for success. For example, it may not be appropriate to bring a guest to a company picnic. If you have a good network in place, a trusted colleague may fill you in, saving you from an embarrassing faux pas.
- **Communication.** Your network can be a channel to get the word out about your accomplishments, talents, and abilities. You can learn about high-profile projects and positions to target for your career success.
- **Recruits.** Your network can help you to advertise a position internally or externally via word of

mouth. You may find someone to hire with little or no expense to your organization.

- **Referrals.** A new administrator in a regional office needed an ethics presenter for an attorney workshop. She contacted Carol, who knew the paralegal manager had attended an ethics workshop. Through Carol, the new administrator found an experienced presenter and enhanced her reputation by being "in the know."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Successful managers network 70 percent more than less successful ones, according to the *Academy of Management Journal*. Even though it may seem to you that the efforts take time away from completing tasks, building relationships with colleagues across the organization will be invaluable to your career and your firm. ✱

about the author

Linda L. Hardenstein, MPA, PCC, President of Hardenstein Consulting LLC, specializes in career development. As an experienced attorney coach with more than 25 years of experience in law, she helps clients to land coveted promotions. She also facilitates powerful workshops enabling attendees to reach their goals, resolve conflicts, and build relationships. Contact her at linda@hardensteinconsulting.com or (831) 233-9186,



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