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THE ART OF DELEGATION

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Among all the business skills that are important to building a practice, delegation is one of the most valuable and possibly the least appreciated. Unlike writing or speaking skills, delegation is not usually a part of a formal education. Most often it is learned on the job and, unfortunately, those who teach it may not be familiar with all of the benefits and nuances of quality delegation.

Delegation is known as a technique for getting the work done, but in fact, it is also a technique for producing more work, enhancing client relations, lowering costs, training, team building, and climbing the corporate ladder.

The popular use of delegation is to move work from one individual to another. When most effectively implemented, this type of delegation creates a system in which work is produced at the most efficient levels. It is supported by the "highest and best use" philosophy in which each individual in the firm is working most profitably.

When most lawyers think of delegation, they think of delegating down to subordinates. However, the effective management of a practice requires delegating across to peers. No firm could function without shared responsibility, and everyone must be active in the process of identifying needs and shifting tasks to appropriate partners within the firm.

However, the value of delegation is not limited to individuals within an organization. One of the most valuable benefits of delegation is delegating out to clients. In today's cost-cutting corporate environment, clients are always seeking methods to reduce legal expenses. Delegating some of the legwork keeps bills down and provides the added advantage of increased interaction between the lawyer and the client.

To some, it may seem strange to try to burden the client with work. For so many years, the concept of good service was built on the philosophy that the client wanted a job taken away and solved. In the past, better service meant a low profile coupled with results. In today's competitive market, low profiles are high risk. The interpersonal interaction that comes from delegating to clients strengthens relationships. Today, good service means results coupled with cooperation.

While this cooperative relationship may decrease initial billable hours, lawyers are finding that interactive relationships produce greater client loyalty, minimize the threat of competition and open the door to additional work. Additionally, delegation frees up time to market to new clients. For successful rainmakers, this free time is extremely valuable.

DELEGATING TO ALLIANCES

Just as delegation to clients enhances client relationships, the same holds true with delegation to prospects. As lawyers pursue prospects, one of the best methods of furthering the relationship is to suggest tasks for the prospects to implement. As prospects implement their assignments they move closer to the close. This approach also facilitates follow-up by lawyers because it is much easier to stay in touch with prospects to monitor their assignments than it is to follow up with nebulous sales calls.

Another environment for delegating out is delegating to vendors. In their desire to obtain and maintain your account, vendors will be pleased to assist you in tasks that enhance the relationship. Vendors could be delegated the responsibility of increasing quality, improving communication, lowering costs, etc.

The concept of delegation as a method for enhancing relationships also applies to employees. Unfortunately, due to poor delegation skills, the process of shifting responsibility from senior to junior can often be perceived as dumping unwanted garbage on unwilling subordinates. Delegation should be supportive – a mentoring process in which people share skills, offer guidance and further the learning process. This interaction is a bonding experience that enhances teamwork. It is a vital process for strengthening the culture of any firm.

An often overlooked benefit of delegation is using it to climb the corporate ladder. Potential leaders have the ability to delegate “up” to their superiors. Subordinates who see opportunities can make suggestions to their superiors along with specific tasks that the superior could implement. Delegating up to subordinates positions them as peers and even authority figures.

STEPS TO STEPPING UP

Delegation as any business skill, improves with practice. You will maximize your success if you follow some delegation guidelines:

1. Share the vision. Too often, delegators simply delegate tasks without communicating the final objective. An understanding of the ultimate goal will stimulate added enthusiasm for the interim tasks.

2. Communicate alignment. Delegation is an opportunity for both parties to benefit. To maximize success, the delegator should be sure that the delegatee appreciates the benefits that he or she will enjoy as a result of the process.

3. Obtain a commitment. Delegation is a negotiation, not a directive. The delegatee should participate in the creation of tasks and commit to complete those tasks with specific deadlines. In effective delegation, there is no term “ASAP.” It’s too vague. The delegator should record deadlines in a calendar and discuss with the delegatee the value of deadlines in a successful relationship.

4. Let go. Delegators are wasting time if they don’t let the delegates do their job. Letting go empowers the delegatee. Responsibility builds self-esteem.

5. Create systematic reviews. Letting go does not mean ignoring the process. It's important to establish regular appointments to review interim results. Regular reviews increase the likelihood of success and reinforce relationships.

Delegation is a remarkably valuable business skill that will enhance any career. Whether the delegation is up, down or across, it's a tool for getting work out the door and additional income in the bank.