
Coach's Counsel: How Can I Better Manage People and Administrative Tasks?

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Coach's Counsel is a monthly column dedicated to helping legal professionals explore solutions to challenges on topics including leadership, collaboration, emotional intelligence, professional relationships, team management, effective communication, and increased self-awareness.

EXCELS: Executive Coaches Exploring Leadership Solutions



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Dear Coaches:

As a partner, how do I manage all the administrative and management stuff I have to deal with? Other people's problems, practice groups, evaluations, bills, hours, etc. I know it needs to be done, but it's not why I went to law school. I am sure I could be better and more efficient at it.

— I Just Want to Practice Law

David: Natalie and I appreciate the submission of this question, and it is one we commonly see in various forms. Quite often, when an attorney is promoted to partner, they are ill-equipped to effectively manage people and teams. Furthermore, law schools, by and large, spend relatively little time addressing leadership, collaboration, cultivating relationships, time management, effective delegation and communication. I recall during my first day of law school in 1991, a member of the faculty said that "when you graduate, you will never think the same way again." He continued, "you will think in terms of consequences and not possibilities. You will walk past a playground of children playing and not see the joy of play, but rather the many ways a child may get injured on the playground." Those words stuck with me, and I believe that it was an accurate summary of my law school experience. Law school curriculum spends a significant amount of time perfecting the assignment of blame, proximate cause, liability and damages. It spends much less time on possibilities, innovation and optimism. To paraphrase [positive psychologist and thought leader Martin Seligman](#), if you didn't have pessimism going in, law school will teach it to you. I believe it is this mindset that also explains why it can be difficult for law firm partners and managing attorneys to be effective leaders.

Natalie: This question is a reasonable one. It's also an inquiry commonly asked by all high achievers, no matter the industry. When I hear this question, I ask one in return: What is in your control and what is NOT in your control? One of my favorite lines to share with clients is "If you don't control the events in your life, the events in your life will control you." If we can control something, we can step up and take responsibility. If we can't control something, we must learn to be flexible and adapt and/or perhaps "let go."

Let's take "other peoples' problems. Can we control how others react to events in their lives? Of course not, but we can control how we notice those problems and to what extent we want to address them. When in a leadership role, it is often necessary to address others' "problems"; particularly if the problems are affecting work performance.

We live in a world today where we can assume everyone has a lot on their plates. If we are starting to notice someone's "problems" impacting their performance, we have two choices.

1. Ignore it; or
2. Address it.

You have a choice. This is where you have control. Remember, all choices have consequences. So think about your end goal.

Choice 1: Ignore it:

Some people believe "if I ignore it, it will go away." I have found this to be just the opposite. If you ignore it, the problem will usually show up some other way and often gets worse. It's your choice to ignore other people's problems. Just be realistic about the impact of this decision.

Choice 2: Address it:

In my opinion, the best choice is to address other people's problems. This is where you have control. When you choose to "address it," you are placing this task as a priority in a busy day. More often than not, the 15-20 minutes set aside to address the "person's problem" will save huge amounts of time down the road. Addressing others' "problems" effectively requires skills additional to lawyering. It requires a solid understanding and demonstration of what is known as "emotional intelligence".

David: When attorneys begin their careers, they tend to focus on demonstrating their IQ (Intelligence Quotient), lawyering skills, meeting billable hour targets and receiving professional development for practical skills such as drafting briefs, agreements and other documents. While it is growing in popularity in recent years, attorneys, by and large, did not receive professional development in management and leadership skills, team building and effective communication. The promotion of going from being an individual contributor or member of a team to then leading that team or department is a difficult transition for many. It requires a mindset shift and intentionality about what kind of leader the attorney wants to be.

In my opinion, effective leaders possess what is known as emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a complex discipline; however, for purposes of this column, emotional intelligence, commonly referred to as "emotional quotient" or "EQ," refers to a leader's self-awareness about how he/she shows up and is perceived by his/her team. It is understanding how you are known in the firm and being aware of nonverbal communication and body language. Emotional intelligence also involves a recognition of one's own emotions as they are happening, the ability to identify those emotions and having the skills to influence those emotions. At a high level, leaders with emotional intelligence also have the ability to recognize emotions in others and use that information to effectively influence behavior.

In order to be an effective leader in a law firm or legal department where stress and pressure can be pervasive, it is important to be an active listener for members of your team. Active listening requires you to be present, focused on the speaker and not distracted by calls, texts or emails. Leadership also requires clear and unambiguous communication of expectations between team members and the leader. It is critical to give direct feedback about areas on which individuals need to improve or when they did something well and can leverage their strengths. Lastly, a critical leadership skill is to seek feedback from individuals and the team as to what you can do better and how you as a leader can improve. This builds trust, enhances direct communication and creates a shared mission team culture.

With respect to evaluations, I cannot emphasize enough that it is vital to provide substantive feedback and direction for career and professional development. We hear feedback from individuals that reviews and evaluations were often meaningless and diminished their trust in a manager or leader because it was interpreted as a lack of caring. The last thing someone wants to see on an evaluation is "meets expectations," "needs improvement," or "keep doing what you're doing." Be thoughtful and give specific feedback and guidance. It will be greatly appreciated. When these behaviors are prioritized and become habits, you will reap the benefits of fewer "people problems."

As for managing client bills and tracking billable hours, this has been a continuous challenge in the legal profession. I recall as an associate that the office manager would get frustrated with certain partners who were consistently late entering their time, and the partners would get upset when they were constantly asked for their time sheets. Fast forward almost 30 years, and I still hear about these same challenges. Even with the advent of sophisticated billing software, getting partners to enter time is still a chore.

Practicing law requires focus on the work product, especially when an attorney is working on multiple client matters at the same time. All things considered, it is difficult to recap in time sheets what an attorney worked on throughout the day. There are various practices and strategies for entering time, and it may take a sampling of different practices before you find the one that works for you. Some attorneys are diligent and organized and enter meticulous time on matters as they are working on them. For some attorneys, juggling multiple matters is difficult to do. Another practice to consider, if your billing software doesn't send alerts, is to set reminders on your computer or phone to prompt you at regular intervals (e.g., every two hours) to stop what you are doing and accurately enter your time on matters you are working on.

Natalie: We either get up every day with intention to prioritize where we spend our time (control), or we get up every day and let others prioritize our day from their demands (lack of control). Realistically, we probably have a bit of both in our days. However, if one values all of the above responsibilities, then one must “take control” and place a priority on scheduling the time to get them done. It may not be realistic to take on all of this work yourself, so it's worthwhile to spend five minutes each day evaluating and prioritizing all of the items that need to be completed to determine what you need to do versus what you can delegate to someone else. And often, that is all it takes. This is a habit that can be built, but it takes intention. Try it!

Have a question for our Coaches? Write to us at editor.plichronicle@pli.edu. Names and information will be kept confidential.

Natalie Loeb, MS, is the founder and CEO of Loeb Leadership, a US-based woman-owned preeminent management and leadership development company with over 50 consultants across the globe. With more than 25 years of experience as an executive coach to influential lawyers and business leaders, Natalie is recognized as an innovator and expert in cultivating leadership within the legal profession. — “I am committed to our mission: developing extraordinary inclusive leaders”. — Natalie Loeb

David B. Sarnoff, Esq., ACC, is an ICF certified executive coach and leadership trainer with Loeb Leadership. David spent almost 10 years in a law firm as a paralegal, law clerk and attorney, and another 17 years in executive search coaching attorneys and consulting for law firms and legal departments. David has coached law firm partners, associates, and directors, as well as general counsels. He has a particular focus in emotional intelligence and raising self-awareness and is certified in the EQ-i 2.0 assessment.



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