

Improve Retention of Associates by Improving Partners' Relationship Skills

By Don Kaufman and Karen Kaufman
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In today's highly competitive labor market, it's difficult enough for law firms to land the most promising young attorneys. But once they're on board, the next challenge is keeping them there. Working with an abrasive partner – however brilliant – can make associates jump ship in a hurry.

Great lawyers tend to be less-than-great managers. They're smart and talented, but they can lack the necessary relationship skills and experience to effectively manage people. They may have excelled at business development and client relations, but can be perceived as difficult by their peers and often don't connect well with associates.

The Aug. 1 issue of *The American Lawyer* cites some striking examples of boorish behavior by partners. One example tells of a partner who brought an associate to tears by e-mailing her work to other partners, explaining that it was for their "amusement, not edification." But while complaints are more likely to be about work flow and communication than outright malevolence, working for an overbearing partner can be a miserable experience for a young associate.

Fresh out of law school, associates join large law firms for prestige and pay. But in addition to the long work hours and relentless pressure to perform well, associates who find themselves toiling for a difficult partner are smart enough not to endure the situation for long – they simply leave the firm.

In a recent speech at the Northwestern School of Law, the general counsel of Cisco Systems, Mark Chandler, supported this point: "In major law firms, I see more and more problems retaining associates. I am inundated with resumes of top-notch associates who don't want to work in large firms anymore."

This situation is a sign of the times and not confined to the legal profession. According to a survey by Watson Wyatt Worldwide, over the past three years 63 percent of all employers have reported a moderate or high level of difficulty in attracting and retaining critical-skill and top-performing employees. At the same time, only 19 percent of employees report difficulty finding another job when they leave a company.

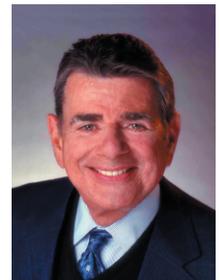
The problem of retention for law firms and other industries is partly generational. Many of today's young workers expect their bosses to be part manager, part mentor and part nurturer. They are the progeny of soccer moms and dads who closely supervised, protected and directed them, creating a similar expectation from work.

But in many cases, the partner who manages the associate is more drill sergeant than soccer mom. This can be traced back to earlier times when the tyrannical law firm partner was more than just a stereotype, he was the reality. Back then, young attorneys were routinely pushed and prodded while burdened with heavy demands, but they wouldn't even think of leaving. Today, jumping from firm to firm is so common that once a year this publication prints a "Top Lateral Hires" issue with plenty of options to choose from for the feature.

The globalization of U.S. businesses and the subsequent talent crunch brought the problem of employee retention to a head. Most top-tier firms now have more work than they can handle, and the only way they can continue to meet the business demand is through their people. More than ever before, they've got to manage how they manage.



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To do this, law firms must engage associates as well as partners to start an open dialogue about the positives and negatives of their workplace and discover areas that need improvement. The annual *American Lawyer* associate satisfaction surveys are a good start, but they don't provide the opportunity for associates to give direct "upward feedback" about specific partners. At the same time, associates should also receive downward feedback from partners and their peers to learn of specific areas of performance they need to improve and develop in order to be successful.

A well-designed feedback system rates partners in areas such as setting clear expectations, respecting work/life balance and actively promoting a firm's values and commitment to their people, clients and quality. The purpose of the feedback system is to recognize a partners' strength that can be leveraged as well as the areas they need to make improvements. The feedback gives employees an opportunity to air their complaints about damaging partner behaviors that interfere with their performance. Simply having the opportunity to provide feedback is cathartic and beneficial for associates, but more importantly it will reveal patterns of behavior and the specific skills that a partner may need to develop.

Typical feedback examples in a well constructed questionnaire include:

- Rate your primary reporting partner on the following:
- The partner listens to me - my comments, suggestions and needs are respected.
- The partner sets clear expectations for my responsibilities and goals for my position.
- I get the opportunity to benefit from the partner's knowledge, technical skills and experience.
- I get meaningful feedback on my job performance.
- The partner is sensitive to my performance needs in the presence of my co-workers
- I'm adequately recognized for the work and effort I contribute to the firm.
- The partner builds a team sharing meaningful work that engages me and others.
- I'm given the opportunity to meet and learn more about our clients and their business.

This type of feedback makes the firm leadership – and the partners themselves – aware of what is working as well as what isn't. But in many cases, feedback alone isn't enough to resolve problems. We have found that once the upward-feedback system is in place, it's important to supplement it with coaching to get the maximum results. It is one thing to point out areas for development but another thing to implement the necessary activities.

Aided by the feedback, partners can be coached on the behaviors he or she should stop, start or continue. Relationship management is often the underlying issue that needs improvement. By simply working on their "relationship skills," many partners can drastically improve their feedback and their productivity.

Some of the most common problems and solutions we find in our practice are micromanagers whose associates are not trusted with meaningful work. Learning to engage associates allows them to hone their skills and increases billing all around. Other managers have developed more satisfying and productive relationships with colleagues, staff and clients by taking the time to acknowledge key milestones and jobs well done. And many independent partners used to flying solo never think about the fact that taking associates out of the office more often in business and social settings helps them gain exposure and experience in developing client relationships.

Successful partners are bright, talented and technically proficient, but at this stage of their careers they must realize that their technical skills got them to where they are, but good people and relationship skills will keep them there and move them and their practice forward.

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