

## **Energizing Associates for Improved Client Service**

As I travel around the country I find fewer instances where young lawyers are excited about their firm, the work they are doing and their future. Law firms need to address this issue because it will ultimately impact client service.

Recently I read a book by Bill Catlette and Richard Hadden titled: *Contented Cows Give Better Milk*. The authors' premise expressed in the title of their book is consistent with the principles expressed by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles in *Gung Ho* and also supported by authors writing on success in professional service organizations, including law firms. In his book *Practice What You Preach*, David Maister provides powerful evidence that a professional service firm's success depends on its ability to train, energize and excite its people. Maister asserts that employee satisfaction is driven by high standards, coaching and empowerment.

Maister's findings are consistent with conclusions by Jay W. Lorsch and Thomas J. Tierney in their book *Aligning the Stars*. They assert that although rainmakers have been recognized and valued in firms for years, *starmaking* is more important to a firm's long term success than rainmaking. "*The people you pay are more important over time than the people who pay you.*" Lorsch and Tierney then describe that young professionals want (1) to learn; (2) career options; (3) affiliation and teamwork; (4) autonomy; and (5) flexibility to better balance their professional and personal lives. I agree with Lorsch and Tierney on what young professionals want, but I believe there is more.

### **Energizing Associates**

What can a law firm do to energize its associates? First, the law firm must clearly articulate the importance of the work associates do, not in terms of billable hours or profits per partner, but rather in terms of how the work benefits clients. Many associates decided to become lawyers because they wanted to contribute in a meaningful way. They will find their work worthwhile when they can re-ignite that sense of making a contribution that matters. Second, law firm leaders need to clearly articulate where the firm is going, how it plans to get there, what are its core values and how each lawyer, both partner and associate, is expected to contribute. If a firm does this well, it will have gone a long way to energize its associates. It will also have created a sense of affiliation and teamwork mentioned by the authors of *Aligning the Stars*.

Firms then need to empower associates to achieve the firm's goals. I believe this is best done by working with each associate individually and listening and understanding what makes him or her unique and special. I strongly recommend that each associate, with the help of a mentor, set goals and develop a plan to achieve them. Associates need to take control of their careers to feel empowered, and setting stretch goals and having a plan is the first step to empowerment. The goals should focus on what they want to learn and what they want to achieve and should focus on their individual needs and dreams and stretch them. When associates take control of their careers, set stretch goals and have a plan to achieve them, they will achieve at higher levels and will be more excited about their future.

Law firms then need to give feedback, especially positive feedback. This is relatively simple, but its application takes real effort. Law firms need to make sure their supervising

lawyers are constantly giving real-time feedback that includes praise at least as often as criticism. As David Maister points out, satisfaction is driven in part by coaching. Looking at the great teams in sports, the coaches play a huge role in the team's success. They recognize that each player is different and they know how to push the right buttons to get the player to perform at a peak level. Law firms too often limit feedback to year-end reviews and rarely give praise when an associate does an outstanding job. In many cases, to push the right buttons, it is actually more important to let associates know when they have done an outstanding job than to rebuke them for a slip in performance. It is essential that associates know how much their work is appreciated. As suggested in *Gung Ho*, when criticism of an associate's work is warranted, it should be done in a way that encourages the associate and shows specifically how the work could be improved.

Interestingly, law firms have complete control over accomplishing the goal of energizing associates, yet few are really doing anything about it. Law firms will be most successful when they raise the level of their lawyers' career satisfaction. If associates feel responsible for and in control of their careers and receive feedback from supervising attorneys, they will become contented cows who produce sweet, rich milk for their firms. .