

Investing in Support Staff Skills

By Tony Reiss

As the markets for professional services become increasingly competitive and complex, the role of the Managing Partner becomes more challenging. There can be specific frustrations such as:

- the slow speed at which changes can be made
- the difficulties of getting partners to agree – whenever 5 partners are gathered together, we all know to expect to get at least ten views expressed
- having apparently got the partners to agree a course of action, there are the challenges of making things happen – and the excuses that partners tend to give about all those clients that needed attention as a priority
- dealing with intransigent partners - those that refuse to play by the rules that the rest of the team have agreed

It all seems like a daunting task. However, Managing Partners will do well to realise that they are not in it alone. In particular, your senior support staff can play a valuable role in supporting you. But, although they are experts in their technical fields, they may well not have been given any coaching in how to cope with these challenging situations. Some of them attend conferences and it is clearly useful to hear how other firms are progressing. But such events do not develop their personal skills.

The other reason to consider investing in support staff skills is that good support staff are ambitious. They want to grow and take on more challenges. If they are unable to put forward their solutions to these challenges in ways that are acceptable to partners, then frustration sets in and they become less able to fulfil the potential of their role. They see all this training being offered fee earners and wonder why they aren't getting any.

Having worked as a Business Development Director in both a management consulting arm of a big 5 accounting firm and a leading City law firm, I knew how difficult it was to maximise the value I delivered to professional firms. There was so much day-to-day stuff that the partners wanted me to do, which deflected me away from more important strategic work. But given the amount of money invested in senior support staff, I sensed the market might be interested in looking for ways of getting more added value from top level support staff. By providing suitable training, firms might find that they could attract, motivate and hold on to their talent for longer. The rewards for this enhanced loyalty are potentially large and manifold.

So we developed two programmes that we thought would help. One was on *Coaching Skills* and covered how senior support staff could develop their role and be seen as competent coaches to the partners. If such skills could be developed, we foresaw a huge transfer of business development skills to those that really need such skills in a partnership; namely, the partners. Part of this programme looked at how senior support staff can build their levels of credibility, trust and rapport with the partners.

The other programme was in *Consulting Skills for Successfully Introducing Change in Partnerships*. This covered strategies for influencing partners, building commitment to projects and dealing with resistance to change. Again, our experience was that a large number of marketing initiatives hardly got off the ground and too many floundered when partners failed to be convinced of the merits of changing their attitude or behaviour. We looked at some the techniques used by management consultants to help them diagnose the driving forces and restraining forces that are inherent in the project. For example, senior marketing professionals found it helpful to realise why partners might resist the introduction of a Customer Relationship Management programme and what they might do to address partner concerns.

Sure enough the interest was there in the market. But what surprised us was that it was only the leading international accounting, legal and actuarial firms that were committed to doing anything about it. They either sent staff on our open programmes or they asked us to tailor the programmes to run in-house.

Some firms asked us to run the programmes across all the different support functions (ie marketing, HR, Finance, IT etc). Other firms asked us to work with the senior members of one particular department. Either way the reactions from participants have been positive and we're delighted that the bigger firms have asked us back for more.

Can you afford to ignore investing in your support staff any longer?

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