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**Maximize the Productivity of
Your Support Team**

*By Dennis McCue, CMC, certified management consultant
and principal of Dynamic Firm Management*

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Maximize the Productivity of Your Support Team

In conversations with principals of law firms, discussion often moves toward some version of "(Staff Member) is not getting the job done." This complaint varies from mild to severe, but when I question attorneys as to how they contribute to the problem, the wheels of thought begin to turn. With that in mind, here are a few critical steps to increase your support staff's productivity:

Set clear and realistic expectations. Many attorneys have no idea how long it actually takes to get the requested work done. If you are asking a support person to do something you have never done, try doing it yourself first to see how long it takes and to discover the kinds of problems that one might encounter. Don't assign tasks at the last possible moment and expect miracles.

Write a job description. Job descriptions are best when written by the person holding the position. Alternatively, the employee and the manager can write the description simultaneously and then compare the versions. Discuss and agree on duties. Work out the discrepancies. Be sure that the staff person understands the expected level of performance and that you regularly communicate about performance and progress.

Remember that you are the person responsible for all work. No matter how much you believe otherwise, you cannot delegate that responsibility. Associates and the support team are in a "helper" relationship with you.

Accountability is a free choice. In most law offices, team members are busy with a multitude of tasks and deadlines. Yet, the boss just keeps heaping on the work. Staff members may take on cases or tasks to accomplish, but true accountability can only be developed by clear communication of the needs and deadlines, and with the agreement of the staff member to be held accountable. For authentic agreement to occur, every individual must have the freedom to say, "I can't get that done in the necessary time frame." The absence of permission to say "No" is common in

law firms — but wherever employees lack the right to turn work away, they have no possibility of being accountable to get work done well and in a timely manner.

Regular communication must be maintained in both directions. When work is assigned to staff members, the responsibility for the efficiency and quality of the work remains with the principal. Principals must develop habits and methodologies of communicating (especially listening) with their team. They also must create policies that encourage staff to initiate discussion about difficulties long before they become problems. Weekly meetings with each member of your team — in private if at all possible — will facilitate much more productivity than they consume in the loss of "billable hours." By developing good communication with your staff, you can lead a team that performs well and takes care of all your firm's duties, obligations, and possibilities.

Honest evaluations are critical. Most team members that I have interviewed don't complain about being criticized for poor performance (in spite of the fact that principals often complain about the performance of their staff). Frequently team members say that they hear nothing — good or bad — about how they are perceived. They operate in a vacuum, not knowing whether their boss is thrilled with their production or just coping.

Great performers in sports and the performing arts receive acclaim and criticism from the public, their peers, and critics, which help them improve. By using these methods, your firm can perform better as well.

— Submitted by Dennis McCue, CMC, at the request of the Law Practice Management Section Executive Committee. McCue is a certified management consultant and principal of Dynamic Firm Management. He specializes in the management concerns of law firms. He can be reached at (949) 640-2220 or by visiting www.dynamicfirm.com. The opinions expressed are his own.