With all the talk these days of mergers, profitability, marketing, management by objectives and their application to your practice, have you considered how you are managing the basic component of success in your firm: people? Time was, personnel was a central concept in law firm management. Fact is, it still is. In sum, running a successful law firm business is about 90% people and 10% economics.

The concept of the legal services support team is clearly the predominant idea governing the structuring of support staff and lawyers in firms today. Not too many years ago, the legal services delivery team included lawyers, legal secretaries and a bookkeeper. Today in larger firms new layers of support staff have been added including legal assistants, managers and administrators, systems and technology personnel, office services providers, recruiters and marketers. Add temporary lawyers, part-time and permanent associates and contract partners and the complexion of personnel management for law firms has become quite multifaceted.

Why should you worry about people management? Effectively managing people will deliver efficient legal services to clients with concomitant economic and psychic rewards to lawyers and staff alike.

How does one effectively manage people in the law office? Simply stated, by adhering to common sense rules about what motivates people and being fair minded in your dealings with them. Dr. Kenneth Blanchard, in his deceptively simple gem of a book The One Minute Manager laid out the basics of effective people management: set goals; praise and reprimand behaviors; encourage people; speak the truth; laugh; work; enjoy. Sound too easy? Not necessarily. Let's examine some guidelines you can use in your office to actuate Blanchard's formula for success.

People need to know what is expected of them, the overall goals and objectives of the organization and their respective roles. In order to get the most out of your firm's personnel, you, as the responsible manager will have to plan, organize, staff effectively and lead. The attributes of a good manager and a good leader are distinctly separate. Today's law firm manager must fill both roles.
The tone you set for your firm will dictate the kind of people you recruit and retain. Two models suffice to get the point across. If you want a staid, conservative law firm which is not growth oriented and is limited as to institutional longevity you can be expense side oriented (cheap), be downward directed (do as I say), tell people what not to do as opposed to what to do; emphasize tradition and punish deviation; and be aloof and unapproachable. On the other hand if you want a progressive, growth oriented organization that provides opportunity and long-term stability, you will stress goals to achieve personal satisfaction; involve lawyers and staff in the process of lawyering and firm management; reward innovation and personal initiative; and have an open, two-way attitude toward communication.

Managing a law firm is not like managing any other business. First of all lawyers and legal staff are brighter than the norm. They perform in a stressful, deadline oriented high quality high expectation environment; require more pampering and are high strung and ego oriented; prefer to work on interesting, challenging matters; aspire to status within their community; and are very hard to manage. As a result, people management in the context of a law firm environment takes considerable time and effort.

The basics of management still apply, however. Create good job descriptions for all parties (even lawyers!) so that each individual can determine the substance and requirements of his respective position. Plan for and recruit based upon real needs and interview thoroughly listening 80% of the time and talking 20%. Orient and train all new members of the legal services team. Motivate people. This is the single most critical factor in maintaining a harmonious and efficient workplace. Remember, people are usually motivated or driven to behave in a way they feel leads to rewards. Study after study has proven that money is not the prime motivator for people, but it clearly is an important one. A compensation system that is fair, competitive and tied to the success of the organization is preferable. It is self defeating to simply compensate people without discussing how they are doing in their jobs. Partners need appraisals as do staff. Feedback is a motivator. Don't forget it. Finally, nurture your people. Nurturing is a primary duty for lawyers. It permits growth and shows caring. To exhibit a caring attitude that fulfills needs of security, group association and self realization is critical.

From any point of view, people management is critical to your success and to the success of those around you. The truism that successful management is the result of doing it right has no greater application than in personnel work. To summarize: have a clearly defined philosophy, establish long-term goals and objectives, continue to reevaluate goals and objectives in the light of changing internal and external circumstances, and achieve results through people by proper recruiting, training, motivational techniques, nurturing, evaluation and compensation. One small summary note: bury your ego and work for the whole organization. It is amazing that there is no limit to what can be accomplished if it doesn't matter who gets the credit.