Are you driving your employees away?

It's not easy managing a law firm. From client demands and looming deadlines to marketing decisions and administrative tasks, you have a lot on your plate. Unfortunately, in the midst of all you do each day, you may not realize that you are engaging in behaviors that drive your employees absolutely crazy. Studies show that when employees leave their positions, it is often in response to dissatisfaction with management or the workplace environment. In other words, their managers and supervisors push them right out of the door. Take a minute to reflect on whether your management style includes any of the following bad boss behaviors.

Nitpicking

If your attorneys and staff consistently provide high-quality work to the firm, why dwell on tiny, harmless mistakes? Newsflash – no one is perfect. Not even you. So, you cannot reasonably expect your employees to never make errors. When they do, address the problem and move on. Don't continuously dwell on the issue or blow it out of perspective with a punishment that far outweighs the crime. Acting in this manner sends a message to your staff that their good work is not of value to you or the practice. It can also diminish their confidence and stir up feelings of resentment. Now, I am not suggesting that mistakes go ignored, especially with all that can be at stake in a legal environment. Just make sure that you provide a balanced and fair review of your staff's performance and leave the nitpicking at home. Remember, an unappreciated employee is a dissatisfied employee.

Micromanaging

A big case just walked through the door. Your plate is full, so you assign it to the most capable and dependable associate in the office. You explain how important the case is and spend some time strategizing about the best course of action. Then, you spend the next six months breathing down her neck about every single pleading, conference, telephone call, and appearance that the case involves. Micromanaging tells your associate that you do not trust him or her to adequately handle the delegated responsibilities. It says that you are expecting failure and can even come off as a narcissistic view that you are better equipped to handle the case. (In which case, you should have handled the matter yourself.)

An effective law practice is not a controlling, restrictive environment. Hopefully, you have staffed your firm with attorneys and support staff who are highly skilled and intelligent. If that is the case, trust them to do the work assigned to them. If that is not the case, then you should be looking for some new employees. Trust your staff members to do the job you hired them to do. It will empower them to meet or exceed your expectations, while also freeing up some of your time and energy.

No gratitude

A simple thank you can go a long way sometimes. Make the effort to tell your employees how much you appreciate their efforts and contributions to the firm. It doesn't have to be a daily love fest, but a periodic thanks can go a long way to boost morale and create a more productive working environment. Far too many managers underestimate the value of appreciation. They may be wrapped up in a case and forget to say thanks, or maybe they are of the opinion that a paycheck is thanks enough.

Your law firm culture has a significant effect on your employees and their willingness to remain with the firm long term. Like it or not, you are responsible for setting that tone. So, unless you want to deal with constant staff turnover or a lack of qualified employees, you may want to start saying thanks more often. The website Small Business Trends offers some ideas for effective and affordable employee recognition.

- A simple thank you note in response to a successful case or project
- Employee of the month recognition
- Flex time incentives for exceptional work
- Have your admin create a wall of fame that acknowledges recent accomplishments
- Award the best parking space on a monthly basis
- Buy the office lunch at the conclusion of a particularly trying case
- A round of applause – Who doesn't want a round of applause once in a while?

Bullying

Are tirades and tantrums a regular part of your management style? Do you use threats or embarrassment to influence your staff? Do you believe that the tougher you are, the more productive your staff will become? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be a bully boss. According to an article in Forbes Magazine, more than a third of all workers in America report experiencing bullying in the workplace. From overt lashing out to less obvious methods of intimidation, far too many employees are dealing with the stress and anxiety brought on by a bullying boss. If you aren't sure whether you fit the bill, here are some examples of bullying behaviors within the workplace:

- Nonverbal intimidation and/or hostility
- Discounting an employee's thoughts or feelings
- Starting or failing to stop rumors or harassment
- Taking credit for the work of others
- Abusing the evaluation process with negative remarks that are unjustified
- Revealing confidential information about an employee to coworkers

These behaviors are destructive within the workplace and often cause good employees to leave for better working environments. If you have found yourself engaging in any of these behaviors, stop immediately. You may not only be driving employees away, but you may also be setting your practice up for its own legal battle.

No loyalty

The customer is always right, right? Not necessarily. Sometimes, the client is wrong and your associate may need you to stand up and say so. Make sure your employees know that you will have their backs as long as they act ethically and in the best interest of the client. Throwing your associate under the bus not only creates an uncomfortable hostility, it can also damage the image of your firm in the eyes of the client. Of course, there may come a time when your employee is wrong and you have to acknowledge that fact. But even in that situation, outside of particularly egregious behavior, it is often best to handle the matter in a way that preserves the professional relationship between your law office and the employee. Show your staff that the firm is loyal to them and they will be loyal to the firm.

If any of these behaviors describe your management style, you may want to make some immediate changes before your employees start leaving for greener pastures. Building and maintaining a successful law practice takes legal and administrative skill. Don't let poor management behaviors keep your firm from reaching its full potential.

About Erika Winston:

Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, The Legal Writing Studio, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written messages. Erika is a regular contributor to TimeSolv and a variety of other publications.