



LAWYER TO LAWYER MENTORING PROGRAM

WORKSHEET Z

OFFICE POLITICS

Worksheet Z is intended to facilitate a discussion about office politics, including appropriate networking, socializing and personal behaviors.

WHAT WENT WELL?

Start by sharing with each other a brief story of something that went well in your practice this week:

Share your reflection by on one of these questions: What caused the good event? What does it mean? How did you contribute? Others? How can you have more such events in the future?

ACTIVITIES FOR TODAY

- If mentoring in-house, discuss the type of social climate that exists in the office, including whether staff is expected to be formal or informal with each other, whether there are social functions that the new associates are expected to attend, the types of expenses for which it is appropriate to file an expense report, the personalities of partners, colleagues, and other staff, the appropriate and expected attire at the office and other firm events, etc.
- If mentoring in-house, discuss the preferences and expectations of the new lawyer's supervisor. Share tips that the new lawyer could use to impress his or her supervisor.
- Suggest appropriate ways for the new lawyer to socialize and get to know other attorneys and judges in the community.
- Discuss the types of social or office behaviors that could be perceived as detrimental for a new lawyer's career, both with colleagues inside and outside of the new lawyer's office.
- Read and discuss the suggestions in the attached article by Kathleen Brady, *Mastering the Game of Law Firm Politics*, New York Law Journal (Sep. 4, 2001).
- Explain to the new lawyer each non-lawyer employee's role in the mentor's office/firm, including the employee's title, job duties, and relationship to the new lawyer (if any) if in an in-house mentoring relationship.



- Discuss the importance of having support staff on your team and treating them with respect.
- Share suggested “do’s and don’ts” of dealing with support staff, colleagues, and those more senior than the new lawyer.
- If the new lawyer has an assistant, secretary and/or paralegal, explain the types of tasks that are appropriate (and inappropriate) to ask each of them to do.
- Discuss the importance of asking for help before taking action about which you are not sure and of obtaining assistance when you have made a mistake. Give the new lawyer examples of problems you have encountered and tried to solve without help and discuss the consequences that occurred.
- If mentoring in-house, discuss the office culture with regard to decision-making and the new lawyer’s authority to do so.
- Talk about how to develop appropriate support systems of persons with whom the lawyer can discuss problems when they arise.

ACTION STEPS

End the session by discussing what action steps you can take to either improve or set yourself up for future success based on today’s discussion. Discuss how one or more of your Signature Strengths can help you achieve success in these steps.

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TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2001

FIRST-YEAR ASSOCIATES

Mastering the Game Of Law Firm Politics

How to Adapt Quickly to a Legal Environment

BY KATHLEEN BRADY

THANKS TO TODAY'S high starting salaries, the time span historically afforded new associates to learn the ropes and make a smooth transition from law student to lawyer has been shortened. Today, firms need to make money faster in order to afford high-priced entry-level classes. Therefore, partners understandably have far less patience for the learning curve and now expect new associates to hit the ground running quickly.

While technical competence is your chief ally to ensure a successful start, it takes much more than that to adapt quickly to a legal environment. New associates must also be adept at the game of office politics.

Playing office politics conjures up images of the brown-nosing "yes man" willing to sell his soul to get ahead. That is certainly one example of office politics; however, it is office politics at its worst. At its best, office politics is simply knowing how to accomplish things within the organization. Understanding office politics can mean the difference between a mediocre career and a stellar rise to stardom. So, whether your goal is to some day rule the office, or simply to get the best assignments, training, experience and exposure, it is imperative to understand the political landscape of the organization you have joined.

Office Politics 101

Lesson One: Know Your Role. Simply put, your role is to make your "boss" look good. The trick at a law firm is to figure out who exactly is your "boss." Sometimes it is the senior partner, but most often it will be a junior associate. Whoever it is, as a first-year associate, you must

Kathleen Brady *Principle, Brady & Associates Career Planners, LLC.*

be mindful of the pressures facing the people you report to. You must also be familiar with the overall mission of the organization. That will help to ensure that all your activity is mission oriented.

In the private sector, the organization's mission is always to provide clients with quality legal services and to maximize profits. The new associate's job is to work on the partner's matters and generate a profit for the firm. Profitability is based on the relationship between annual revenues per lawyer and annual costs per lawyer. Approximately 75 percent of every dollar goes toward compensation in a law firm. The ability of a firm to generate

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a profit depends on whether the firm maximizes its relationship between productivity, cost and expenses, while at the same time maintaining client service and satisfaction.

Fiscally sound firms recognize that they cannot survive simply by cutting costs as low as possible and/or raising billing rates as high as possible. They survive by following a basic financial management principle: control cost by managing the relationship of revenue to cost in order to maintain the desired percentage profit margin.

Associates must generate fees equivalent to three times their annual compensation for the firm to break even. That means, assuming a target of 2,000 billing hours per year, a first-year associate earning an annual salary of \$125,000 would require an hourly billing rate of more

than \$200 to generate even a nominal profit.

Obviously, the higher the number of billable hours generated the greater the profit. A 2,000-hour requirement breaks down to 167 hours a month, or 8.35 hours a day. For associates juggling several projects, that translates into 10 to 12 productive hours a day in the office. By getting into the habit of working at a steady pace of 10 or 12 productive hours a day, you can "bank" a few extra hours in order to have the freedom to leave early for the occasional social opportunity.

Help your career get off to the proper start by understanding how your role fits into the bigger picture. You can have an enormous impact on the way the client views your organization if you:

1. Demonstrate an awareness of billable and accurate time keeping from the beginning. Record your time accurately and in a timely manner. Don't reduce or enhance your hours based on how long you think an assignment *should* have taken you. Leave that decision to the more experienced partner. If you believe there is some reason that billing the time you have recorded would be unfair to the client, talk to the partner in charge.

2. Be client sensitive. Keep in mind that clients may see your time records. Record with details. "Five hours research" isn't particularly helpful; "Five hours researching XYZ issue" is. Also, avoid trying to be cute by recording things like "five hours spinning my wheels." Such an entry does little to illustrate the value of your role on the project.

3. Know what you can bill. It is more complicated than it sounds. For example, whom do you bill when you are traveling for one client but working on a draft for the other while on the plane? Whom do you bill if you are researching an issue that impacts multiple clients? Are there special billing arrangements

with specific clients? Ask partners for guidance with these issues. It will illustrate sensitivity to complex client issues and underscore your good judgment.

4. Understand that billable hours count more than non-billable hours. Recruiting activities, pro bono projects, continuing legal education seminars and other administrative tasks are important, and time ought to be allocated for these things throughout your career. Such activities are vital to the life of the firm. By assuming responsibility for these tasks, you demonstrate a commitment to the firm. Be mindful, however, to maintain the proper balance when divvying up your time.

Spoken, Unspoken Rules

Lesson Two: Pay Attention. During orientation, policies and procedures are reviewed in painstaking detail. Listen! Knowing the rules will save you from potentially embarrassing, career altering goofs from which it might be difficult to recover. The written rules will explain things like time off to which you are entitled, reimbursable expenses; perks and benefits as well as established procedures for photocopying, proofreading, requesting additional support services, etc. It would be helpful to review the attorney handbook and any other manuals you receive during orientation to familiarize yourself with such information.

As important as it is to know the written rules, knowing the unwritten/unspoken rules is even more vital. Simple observation can uncover mountains of information. For example, observation can help you unravel the intricacies of the new "business casual" dress codes. (You would be wise to recognize that Business Casual is not the same as Law School Casual.) Look at what people are wearing and, when in doubt, err on the side of being more conservative.

The written rules might indicate that office hours start at 9 a.m., but through observation you may learn that the partner in charge of your department arrives at 8 a.m. every day. In that instance, you should adjust your schedule. Face time is important. You want to be seen in the office when others are there. It helps to form a positive impression.

Careful observation can also uncover the *true* billable requirements. For example, the organization's NALP (The National Association for Law Placement) form might indicate that there is a 1,900-hour billable requirement, but observation will uncover that successful associates bill closer to 2,100. Armed with that

information, you can determine what you need to do to advance your career.

The bottom line is pay attention to what people *do*, as well as what they say.

Gathering Information

Lesson Three: Read Firm Propaganda. During the recruiting process, you undoubtedly read the firm brochure and visited its Web site. Go back and revisit the information. Ask the marketing department for any additional information on the firm. Note how the organization describes itself to new recruits and clients. This is a good way to gain insight into institutional values, cultures and norms. You can also learn some interesting tidbits about the personalities. Know as much about your organization as possible throughout your tenure there. Remember that information is power.

Lesson Four: Listen to Gossip. Office gossip serves a purpose. Listen to rumors and gossip — don't spread it, don't comment on it, don't believe it is 100 percent accurate, but know it. Knowing the reputations of different partners will help you uncover not only who the politically powerful players are, but also, what skill sets are rewarded in this culture. Do the most powerful partners have a large book of business, or strong administrative skills, or some other common attributes? If your long-term goal is to be a partner, you will want to think about ways to start developing the appropriate skill sets now.

Also, try to uncover the reputations of junior associates. Who have been labeled "superstars," "losers," and "troublemakers?" What characteristics do they have in common? Do you share any of these characteristics? Can you emulate the positive characteristics? Can you shed the negative ones?

Power and Responsibility

Lesson Five: Understand Power. There are two kinds of power in every organization: "Position Power" and "Personal Power." Position Power is based on a person's role within the firm: department manager, committee chair, etc, while Personal Power is your innate ability to accomplish tasks and goals no matter where you sit on the food chain.

As an entry-level associate, you may have greater "position power" than legal assistants and support staff, but you must use this power wisely. The support staff can make your life infinitely easier and help you advance your career if you treat them with the respect and admiration they deserve. Typically, they know

the written and unwritten rules and can help you navigate the terrain. Remember to share the glory with them; it will make the pain that much more bearable. Besides, it is a sure-fire way to enhance your personal power.

Career advancement is based on your ability to develop your own personal power. You can increase your personal power by understanding the golden rule: partners want to work with associates they can rely on to do quality work in a timely fashion and who keep them informed. By developing a reputation as the "go to" associate who happily performs the less desirable assignments with the same level of enthusiasm and attention to detail as the "sexy" assignments, you will be sought after by partners to work on their matters because you make their lives easier. But don't wait. If you believe you have something to offer on a particular matter, volunteer. Review the new matter sheets to familiarize yourself with work being done throughout the firm and create your own opportunities.

Lesson Six: Take Responsibility for Your Own Career. Throughout your career, you should benchmark your progress against your colleagues. What kinds of assignments are others in your class getting? If others appear to be getting more sophisticated work, you need to ask yourself why. Is it because you have not proven yourself to be reliable? Is your substantive work not up to par? Answers to these questions can help you see yourself through the eyes of your superiors and enable you to address issues before they become monumental. And, before you assume there is some great conspiracy by the power structure to sabotage your career, determine how your behavior may be contributing to the situation and try to correct that first. If you aren't sure why it is happening, ask for feedback.

Identify attorneys at your organization whom you admire and deem to be successful. Seek their advice and counsel on your work and career goals.

The great philosopher Plato said, "Those who think they are too smart for politics will be ruled by those who are dumber." Master the game of office politics early on, and watch your career soar to great heights!

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