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Striking the Right Balance With Your Newfound Authority

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Special to the Legal

As a grade “K-JD,” or someone who completed all schooling, from finger painting to issue-spotting, with no gaps in between, graduating law school and entering the “real world” required many adjustments. During my post-law school clerkship, it took several months to become acclimated to working a standard business day, every day. After all, higher education allows for mid-afternoon naps and no-work Fridays in ways that the legal profession simply does not.

Starting work at a law firm brought other changes. These included a longer and more variable workweek. The biggest adjustment, however, was having a legal assistant who reported to me. Being able to delegate work to paralegals, research librarians and other nonlegal personnel was also a novel experience. This wasn’t the first time that I had hierarchical authority, but the



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stakes were much higher than during my previous experiences in student leadership roles.

This made it essential to strike a proper balance early on and set a standard that I could feel good about as a fledgling legal professional. Although there is no one way to be a good boss, here are four points that all young lawyers should consider as they adjust to their newfound authority:

Whether you work at a corporate law firm of 500 or a public interest organization of five, you’re probably sharing nonlegal personnel access with multiple (and oftentimes numerous) other people. Even legal assistants typically have at least a 3:1 attorney ratio. It follows that when

you assign a task to a staff member, yours will usually become one of many in queue for completion.

That’s common sense. But it’s easy to forget when you, too, are responsible for managing an ongoing laundry list of assignments and deadlines. You probably don’t appreciate the partner who orders you to shove everyone else’s work aside and focus solely on their needs “just because.” It’s equally unfair to demand that a staff member get an assignment “done yesterday” when it can easily wait until the end of the week.

If you do have an urgent assignment that conflicts with another attorney’s, don’t let the staff member risk prioritizing “incorrectly” and incurring someone else’s wrath. It’s your responsibility to contact your colleague and find a solution. More often than not, you can reach a compromise that everyone can live with.

To expand on point one, avoid bombarding nonlegal personnel with major, last-minute projects at all

costs. Emergencies beyond your control are bound to happen. But you should strive to give all assignments as far in advance as possible.

I say “strive,” because even if you have the best of intentions, you will occasionally mess this up. That could be because you glossed over an email, overlooked a calendar notification or have been so drowning in work and pressed for time that you couldn’t mentally process that one additional thing until it was almost too late.

Whatever the reason, apologizing and taking responsibility from the start can go a long way. But you should also consider going above and beyond to express your gratitude. Whether that means writing a heartfelt note or buying a gift certificate to a favorite restaurant, the gesture is ultimately an accessory to the thought.

A hierarchy is a means of organizing delegation power and authority from the top on down. Hierarchies are not inherently good or bad. Few organizations can function without them, and your employer—whether a law firm, corporation, or public interest group—is probably no exception to this rule.

A pecking order, however, assigns status based on organizational position. This is a hierarchy gone wrong. Whether you’re a senior partner, junior associate, or paralegal, you should treat all of your colleagues

with dignity and respect. The ability to assign work to someone is never a license to mistreat them.

If someone you assigned work lets you down professionally, resist the impulse to escalate from zero to 60. That’s not to say you should unconditionally turn the other cheek; some offenses are so flagrantly inappropriate that they require immediate corrective action following company procedure.

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For mild to moderate slip-ups, however, try to remember that everyone makes mistakes, including you. Unless this individual has let you down multiple times before, it’s better to try to resolve your differences privately and without formal disciplinary measures.

Even if you’re not the type to blame other people for your own mistakes (and you shouldn’t be!), you may be tempted to stay silent if a third party assigns real or perceived blame to a staff member when you, in fact, are

responsible. This happens especially frequently to legal assistants, and because they are the nonlegal personnel with whom you’ll work the most, you have additional incentive to correct the record and stand as a united front. Even if the staff member is technically “at fault,” you, the attorney, are ultimately accountable for their actions.

Sometimes, you may see a personnel member being mistreated by a coworker, or even someone from outside of your organization. While you should try to speak up in a politely assertive manner, direct confrontation may be out of the question if the offending individual is a rainmaking partner or high-profile client. Under those circumstances, consider sharing your thoughts with a trusted and more senior colleague who may be able to advocate on your behalf. Failing that, you can always express solidarity with the staff member directly.

Like most anything else, becoming a good boss is not a destination, but a journey that continues as you progress through your legal career and grow as a person and professional. If ever in doubt, you can never go wrong with the golden rule. •