

Law Firms: Ditch the Hierarchy and Embrace Culture for All

Relegating support staff to second-class status hurts your law firm.

By [Eric Farber](#)

A few years ago, I was on an airplane and got to chatting with the guy sitting next to me. He was also a lawyer running his own firm. “How many people do you have?” I asked.

“There’s four of us,” he said.

“So, two attorneys and two paralegals?” I asked.

“Oh, no, I mean four lawyers. We have five assistants, so I guess there’s nine in total. But we have four lawyers,” he said.

This Guy Forgot More Than Half His Workforce

He was successful in an interesting practice, and I’m guessing his support staff worked their asses off. Yet he essentially ignored their existence. Unfortunately, he’s not alone in this. It’s common for law firms to consider attorneys first and other employees second — if they are considered at all.

Treating support staff as second-class citizens hurts your law firm. However, it is possible to show your respect to staff and earn their loyalty without sacrificing the respect given to lawyers: [Create a firmwide culture of equality.](#)

Employees Don’t Feel Safe When They’re Replaceable

When people are relegated to second-class status, they do not feel safe or secure in their positions. And it’s difficult to care about the success of a business that makes you feel replaceable and disrespected.

I’ve seen firms where everyone addressed the attorneys as “Mr.” or “Ms.” but used first names for support staff. They insisted attorneys be shown a level of deference that was deliberately withheld from support staff. It created a culture of

hierarchy — a caste system that labeled support staff as less deserving of respect than attorneys.

To rid your firm of the social hierarchy, you must encourage [respect for all employees](#). Get rid of the caste system that currently makes support staff — paralegals, assistants, receptionists, IT techs, mailroom workers, operations teams — feel replaceable and puts undue pressure on attorneys.

Provide Training and Professional Development Opportunities

In almost every law firm I've encountered, employees in support roles have an inherent feeling that their professional development does not matter, as they are not on track to become lawyers. I am confident this problem is rampant among all professional services organizations, but law firms feel it particularly acutely.

Most professionals in other industries engage in professional development through classes, retreats and training, but the legal industry's caste system extends to education. Firms support their attorneys' professional growth but do almost nothing to assist in the training and development of support staff.

To encourage a culture of equality, introduce more professional development opportunities for your support staff. When we invest in the growth of our staff, their performance improves. Invariably, so does that of our business. If support staff feel they have value, they will work harder, be more devoted and collaborate better with attorneys.

[Autonomy over one's job is one of the key metrics of job satisfaction](#). So, if we simply hand staff a bunch of forms to fill out without involving them in developing the best process or workflow, they become little more than assembly line workers in an office setting. Give people a voice to speak up and make changes, especially to the work they do every day. Make sure they know their voice is valued.

A good organizational culture rewards contributing with a full voice. This is where you can truly see how a team member can contribute on a larger scale. When people don't feel safe, they won't speak up when they see mistakes. At our firm, we ask everyone to keep a "failure log" on their desk. Every time they see a

mistake, they write it down and bring it to the attention of the person to fix it. Keeping quiet is the failure. We use this to see who is paying attention.

Giving people autonomy, involving them in the process, and providing constant training to help them get better will raise their game.

I'm often asked what kind of training do you give "non-lawyers?" The answer is simple: Just about anything that will help them improve in their job. Customer service, law, research, or the basics of how to write a great email message.

Attorneys Will Appreciate the Change

You might be asking, "Won't attorneys feel disrespected?" I have not found this to be the case in firms that make the switch. That's because in addition to demoralizing support staff, the caste system puts undue pressure on attorneys. They feel the weight of carrying the firm and continuously strive to earn the title bestowed on them.

When you don't train staff or make them feel 100% equal in the process, the burden falls on the attorney to carry the load. Conversely, when you treat everyone as equally deserving of respect, it takes pressure off attorneys. It allows them to focus on the job they're doing and not the title and social role that accompanies it. Fewer distractions equal better performance.

Recently, a new attorney joined us. I asked her what the difference was between her last firm and ours. She replied that her staff here really connects with the clients. Their mutual trust allows her to get her job done, and she doesn't have to get on every client call.

This is how it is supposed to work. When people are well trained, confident, see opportunity and are treated as equals, they lean into their job, do their part. It allows everyone to be more productive. That's healthy office culture.

Creating a Culture of Equality

It may take you some trial and error to find the right balance for your firm. Remember, the goal isn't to overly focus on either support staff or attorneys. It's to create an environment that respects and celebrates everyone. By showing all employees that they're valued, they'll feel more loyalty toward your firm, respect

for one another, and a greater willingness to collaborate across roles. That's a win for everyone.

ERIC FARBER

Eric Farber is CEO and chief legal officer of Pacific Workers' Compensation Law Center and the best-selling author of ["The Case for Culture: How to Stop Being a Slave to Your Law Firm, Grow Your Practice, and Actually Be Happy."](#) He's on a mission to change how law firms operate by showing lawyers the value of putting culture first. His focus on culture helped him build a seven-figure firm that has gone from four people to 40 in just five years and been an Inc. 5000 company twice. Follow him @RealEricGarber.

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