

OOPS!

I'm The Manager!

5 Easy Steps to Overcome Being a Not-so-Good Manager of Paralegals and Liking It!

by Katharine Giacalone

Law firms, like many other professional service providers these days, realize the importance of "running a business" which includes hiring and managing good legal professionals, is critical to their success. Constant activities – finding clients, keeping clients, making money and... finding more clients, provides the revenue flow, but it takes more than these activities to run an effective organization. Hiring excellent talent, creating solid business processes and having a vision for the business are all essential to being financially sound.

While most organizations can develop processes and business plans, some have trouble recruiting, managing and retaining staff – and without solid people, organizations fall apart – it's that simple. One person cannot be solely responsible for running an empire or successful firm. So, how does the magic happen? Who does all the work in the firm? People...and being a good manager is key to the success of any firm. Of course, you have to hire the "best and the brightest" and when you do you have to protect your "assets" and keep the staff engaged, motivated, productive and happy. Yes, I said "happy." So having a manager who is a good listener, communicates well, is organized, is able to make decisions and rally around his/her team makes all the difference in organizations. Making a good hire is essential, but keeping him/her motivated to come to work and do a good job is also essential!

While I know legal professionals are hired by firms for two reasons: one, "who" they know – their contact list or Rolodex (now I'm dating myself) and two, "what" they know – their areas of subject matter expertise – these folks could eventually have the responsibility of managing staff. While the "contacts" and "expertise" got them hired and maybe promoted, it won't keep them there! What does is the ability to communicate with others, show respect, face facts, use humor and tact when making things happen throughout the day – that makes the manager happy and productive at work. All with ease, of course, while keeping their sanity along the way!



It's no surprise that lawyers think and feel that sometimes they don't make good managers or even like managing. Their law school career took them through constitutional law, torts, civil procedures, legal writing, case analyses and legal reasoning to name a few. Not a lot of courses about "managing staff" or "conducting performance appraisals." It's hard to find anything about human resources, managing people or teams in these curriculums. So managing people is a whole new world – one that folks aren't prepared for, haven't thought about or say "I didn't go to law school to do performance appraisals!"

Unfortunately, there's no magic pill or crystal ball here – it's hard work being a manager – and it's not for everyone! I hear it all the time – "scientists, doctors, accountants, lawyers, etc. don't make good managers." So for those who want to make it work – here are five easy strategies you most likely know but tend to forget when you become a manager – what I refer to as "The Forgotten Five®."

1. **Knowing Who's Who** – know yourself first, and then try to figure out others. What type of kid were you on the playground? The type of kid who:

- made sure everyone got a turn at bat? (The Peacemaker)
- had everyone line up and count off by twos? (The Organizer)
- changed the rules in the middle of the game? (The Revolutionary)
- wanted to play it your way? (The Steamroller)

So, how do you spot these Playground Personalities®? Here are some clues:

- **Peacemakers** appreciate communication and collaboration; they need to make sure everyone is okay, they are loyal and don't necessarily like conflict. How do you spot a Peacemaker? In a meeting if a staff member's eyes start to dart down in avoidance when two other staff members are having a disagreement – that's a clue!

- **Organizers** are highly structured and decisive. They manage by schedules, have a high sense of tradition and are extremely reliable and dependable. If a staff member comes to a meeting prepared with an agenda, time lines and lists – make no mistake, you are working with an Organizer!

- **Revolutionaries** hate routine and prefer to act now and beg forgiveness later! They like a lot of action and the thought of routine work kills their spirit. They are fun to be with and easy to get along with. Their mantra is "Let's do it!"

- **Steamrollers** value education, competence and intellect. They are seen as the subject matter experts, they like to explore and they want to be known for their ideas. You know you are working with a Steamroller when they take the opposing view point and keep the ideas floating at 30 thousand feet instead of on the ground!

How do you know who's who?

You now know a little about each Playground Personality so it's important to know what actions and words might motivate each. Have you ever "watched" your staff or observed their behaviors in meetings? Not in a creepy sense – but really spent the time watching their body language and interactions with others? You'd be amazed what you will learn. Peacemakers make eye contact and engage the person they are speaking with; Organizers may stand up in a meeting and take charge at a flip chart; Revolutionaries are sometimes distracted by the whole conversation and will start their own conversation with the person next to them,

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if it's not going their way! How about listening to the words your staff uses – do you really hear what they say? Peacemakers use the words, “I feel...,” Organizers use, “I think...,” Revolutionaries say, “I don’t like...” and Steamrollers say, “I believe or my philosophy is....” Applying these clues should help you get to an accurate assessment of who’s who.

2. The Complexity of Respect – we all want to be treated with respect. But respect means something different to each of the Playground Personalities. The principles of respect never change, but the ways we express them do. Showing respect to a Peacemaker means working together, brainstorming possibilities and getting people involved along the way. When you want to show respect to a Steamroller give them a difficult problem to solve and ask them for their opinions. It’s as easy as that!

3. Facing Facts – this is critical in the day-to-day interactions with staff, clients, witnesses, etc. Managers need to make sure they collect facts through the eyes of each Personality, if they don’t they will miss important information. So send the Peacemaker to find out about how the people fit into the picture, ask the Organizers to gather details and straight answers, even if you don’t want to hear them! Let the Revolutionaries do their thing and have them discover issues way in advance before something explodes and allow the Steamroller to validate the information along the way, so it’s not so overwhelming.

4. Finding Humor – which is never personal! Don’t make light of serious situations that affect people’s lives, however find the absurdity in the situation and focus on it. The Playground Personality that does this flawlessly is the Revolutionary because they value stepping back and looking at the entire situation as well as the people in it – it keeps them grounded!

5. Using Tact – which is where the rubber meets the road! Remember we get paid for getting things done. This looks very different when you are working by yourself versus with others. Anyone can implement a plan, but it’s creating the plan and getting the buy-in from people along the way that gets the most out of the manager’s, as well as the team’s efforts.

A Managing Partner wondered why his case team always resisted his ideas and pushed back on his work expectations after he spent countless hours outlining the matters of the case. He hired me to answer the question “Why is this team so frustrating?” After a few interactions with the team, I found out: the team felt “barked at. They never felt their were heard, the communication was one-way, they received endless “to do lists” with little recognition and felt trapped by deadlines.

Things improved dramatically once the Managing Partner made a conscious effort to have two-way communication, invite people to give input and ask the case team members for their feelings, thoughts, opinions and ideas.

I know managing isn’t why people went to paralegal or law school – but it comes with the territory and it pays to have five easy to remember strategies at your fingertips to be able to communicate with people, so time, money and effort is not wasted. So throw out the Golden Rule that we all grew up with and replace it with “Communicate with people the way they like to be communicated with – not the way you like to be communicated with!” It makes all the difference!



Katharine Giacalone, The Corporate Nanny™ is a people relationship expert and author of *Oops! I'm the Manager! Getting Past "What Do I Do Now?" In 5 Easy Steps*. She is the President of KGWorks, an HR and organization development consulting firm in Washington, DC. Got a question? Send her a note at kathy@thecorporatenanny.net.