

Practical Success

Cordell M. Parvin

Practical Supervision Skills For Attorneys

In our coaching program, we work both on client development and leadership. It is important to cover both because without a team, your client development efforts will be for naught. Here are some questions I ask:

- Are you treating the lawyers who work for you with the same dignity and respect you treat your clients?
- Are you challenging the lawyers who work for you to achieve at high levels and are you letting them know you believe in them?
- Have you recently given praise to any of the younger lawyers who work for you?
- Have you thanked them for a job well done?



A few years ago a father told me a story about his son, who was an associate in one of the nation's largest law firms. The son had recently completed a complicated deal for an Asian corporate client. The client was so happy that they paid the firm a bonus and wrote the firm's leaders a letter, extolling the associate's work. The law firm leaders never told the associate about the bonus or about the client's rave review. They failed to recognize that the client

might send the young lawyer a blind copy of the letter. The young lawyer, fluent in Asiatic languages and rich in entrepreneurial skills, left the firm and took the client with him.

I hope that story amazes you. For the life of me I cannot understand why the firm leaders did not make a big deal about the praise and bonus.

One of the very best books on leadership is *The Leadership Challenge*, now in its fourth edition. James Kouzes and Barry Posner are the authors. Chapter 11 of the book is "Recognize Contributions." In chapter 11, Kouzes and Posner say: Exemplary leaders understand this need to "recognize contributions and are constantly engaged in these essentials:

- Expect the best;
- Personalize recognition."

Expect the Best

Kouzes and Posner remind us that growing up we wanted to live up to the expectations of our parents, coaches, and teachers. Do you remember that experience? I would bet you stretched to meet their expectations and felt blessed that they believed in you.

You are playing the same role when you are supervising young lawyers. Have you conveyed that you expect the best and that you believe in them?

Cordell M. Parvin built a national construction practice during his 35 years of practicing law. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development, planning, and client development. You can subscribe to his Blog at <http://www.cordellblog.com/>, connect with him on LinkedIn at <http://www.linkedin.com/in/cordellparvin>, join his Facebook Fan Page at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Cordell-Parvin-Lawyer-Coaching/222291473905?ref=ts>, and follow him on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/cordellparvin>.

If you do, your young lawyers will strive to live up to your expectations. They will also become more confident in themselves.

Personalize Recognition

Kouzes and Posner share that one of the more common complaints about recognition is “far too often it’s highly predictable, routine and impersonal.” They further say: “By personalizing recognition, leaders send the message that someone took the time to notice the achievement, seek out the responsible individual, and personally deliver praise in a timely manner.” One of my favorite quotes from this chapter is: “Leaders get the best from others not from building fires under people but by building a fire within them.”

I practiced law for 37 years. In that long career I met very few senior lawyers who built a fire within the lawyers who worked for them. Most senior lawyers understand the importance of giving both positive feedback and constructive feedback. The concept is simple and the reasons for it are easily understood. Yet getting partners to actually give feedback has been a challenge.

When I was building my team, I made a remarkable discovery. I found that each lawyer who worked for me had unique talents, unique dreams, and unique challenges. Kouzes and Posner note: “To make recognition personally meaningful, you first have to get to know your constituents.” You will only understand what makes each associate unique if you truly get to know each of them, not just as associates, but as individual people.

Here is a list of 10 things you should know about the lawyers who work for you:

1. Name of spouse and how long married;
2. Names of children and ages;
3. Their most important non-work, non-family activity;
4. Why they joined the firm;
5. What work they have done that they enjoyed the most;
6. What they want to accomplish in their career;
7. Their number one goal for this year;
8. What non-monetary thing motivates them the most;
9. Who their best friend is in the firm;
10. What career development activities they want to pursue.

Knowing associates as people and not just by their statistics, class, and work product, gives you an opportunity to figure out which buttons to push and how to push them to best help the associate achieve his or her career goals.

The second component is that the associates who work for you should know you. That means being open with your associates, including having an open door. It means sharing your own career dreams and challenges and your interests outside the office.

When you have built trust and rapport you can figure out how best to personalize recognition. Clearly, saying thank you for a job well done is the starting point. Then, figure out what would make the recognition memorable so that your associate will remember the contribution she made to the project. Next, specific praise has greater impact than general kudos: “Great job on handling the Henderson case” is more effective than “Keep up the good work.” Finally, praise in a way that will be most meaningful to the associate. While one of your associates may respond well to a public back patting in an office corridor, another one of your associates might be more appreciative of a handwritten note.

Becoming a good leader and supervisor takes time and practice. When will you start?