

LEARNING TO BE AN ATTORNEY-MANAGER: THE NEXT STEP FOR MIDDLELEVEL ASSOCIATES

How to Delegate a Task

An associate's role at a firm is a gradual evolution. Little by little associates find themselves spending more time delegating and assigning work to others and less time working on their own product. On February 8, Jay Sullivan of Exec/Comm advised the attendees of the City Bar's Professional Development Breakfast Workshop, "The Successful Attorney Manager: Motivating and Delegating Effectively," that as midlevel associates you are expected to delegate and that it is essential to learn how to delegate effectively in order to enable junior associates to do the best possible job.

Choosing the assignment

First, says Sullivan, before you delegate an assignment, stop and think what will motivate the junior associate. You can do that by remembering what motivated you as a junior associate. What keeps them motivated, notes Sullivan, is recognition, challenging and interesting work, and the opportunity for personal growth and achievement. As a mid-level manager these are under your control.

So try to give assignments that would provide the junior associate with a great opportunity or give them something you know they have an interest in doing. When you have to give a routine assignment, explain that you know this isn't new or challenging to them but you know they have done this before and have always done a good job. Then, advises Sullivan, let them know that next time you will try to give them something they are more interested in.

Choosing the assignee

Once you have the assignment in hand the next step is to sit down with the junior associate face to face and have a conversation about the new assignment. It is best to avoid giving the assignment via email, advises Sullivan.

First, probe the junior associate for experience. You want to make sure the person you are about to delegate to has the necessary skills to take on the task. To do this, says Sullivan, ask revealing questions about past assignments such as, how did you accomplish that or tell me what you did on job X? Become a focused listener, says Sullivan, look open, involved and responsive. Send non-verbal cues such as nodding your head and showing interest in what they are saying. This type of discussion will allow you to assess whether this person is the right person for the assignment.

Delegating the assignment

Having found the right person, you are ready to delegate the assignment. Begin the conversation by stating the big picture. Explain the firm's and/or client's objectives and why this task is important to the firm. Explain what the specific project is, clearly defining the tasks involved.

Next, says Sullivan, explain the roles of others. Let the associate know who is on the team, what is each person's role and what is the chain of command. Let the associate know who she can go to for additional information on the project. State the reasons for selecting the associate for this assignment, and describe the benefits to that individual for taking it on. Remember not to leave time deadlines vague, urges Sullivan, and be sure to say if the project is urgent.

Before you end the conversation remember to summarize what you have just said and review

the specifics of the assignment. Ask questions to find out what the associate thinks he is supposed to do. This gives you the opportunity to further explain, correct any misunderstandings or tweak what it is you want.

By the time you leave the assignment with the associate, she should know which way to turn when she walks out of the office, says Sullivan. This will get you what you want and help the associate gain the skills and recognition he needs.

Though it is important to give associates space to get the job done, giving space does not mean ignoring them until the deadline is near. Check in a few days before the project is due, ask specific questions to see how they are doing and make sure they are on the right track. If you don't do this, warns Sullivan, don't be surprised if the work product is not on time or is not what you needed.

Delegating, says Sullivan, is about learning to give up control. But if you learn how to give junior associates enough information that will allow them to deliver the best possible work product to you, letting go will not be so hard.

For more information on the Professional Development Breakfast Workshops and a complete schedule of upcoming sessions, please visit www.nycbar.org.



Jay Sullivan of Exec/Comm