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Inspire Your Team

6 ways to create a productive working
environment for in-house legal teams



Over the past decade, we've transformed the way in which lawyers, consultants and legal teams work. Today, we're one of the largest and fastest growing flexible legal services businesses, continuing to lead the market we created and completing hundreds of assignments with the world's leading businesses and law firms.

Winning numerous awards along the way, LOD is continually recognised for creating different and better ways of working for both lawyers and legal teams.

The merger between LOD and AdventBalance created a NewLaw business with global scale; ten offices, 600 lawyers, and more than 500 corporate and law firm clients. It has been described as "one of the most significant deals in years in the legal services sector" (American Lawyer).

Introduction

You are no longer just a lawyer. You might like to think that this is still what you do, but as our Toolkit series has explored, you are now also responsible for a whole heap of other stuff ranging from setting and managing the KPI's for your team, through to implementing ways to increase the impact of your team on the business as a whole.

It's easy to forget that while you are busy working with the external facing elements of your business, the internal elements, i.e. your legal team, can suffer if they don't feel they have a solid framework in which they can thrive.

In a recent study from the Henley Business School, the majority of organisations they spoke to cited leadership capability and management effectiveness as their top challenges. Employee engagement, wellbeing and retention are key issues in an increasingly competitive workplace, and the skillset to deal with these issues isn't always a natural fit for lawyers.

As teams strive to both measure and justify their effectiveness, it's actually quite difficult to judge how these are being influenced – both positively or negatively – by their managers. While most people can spot the traits of a really bad manager; temperament, conflicting messages, poor ethics or a lack of support and communication, establishing what makes a really good manager is far harder.

How then do you add effective manager and team leader to your growing list of things to do? Here at LOD, we've been discussing this issue with many of our GC and law firm clients. In the last of our Toolkit series, we have put together a set of tips you may wish to consider using as a management tool to ensure that your team is full of productive, happy and satisfied people.

#1

Know who you are

Have a good think about how you are perceived by others and what characteristics they might consider would make you a good manager. Knowing who you are and what you represent, and the effect you have on your team, is key to creating a strong and beneficial working relationship.

Being the life and soul of the party might be a great personality trait, but a failure to acknowledge the gravity or importance of a situation, or going into survival mode when under extreme stress, might not be the best way to get the most out of your colleagues.

By identifying certain triggers that bring out the worst in you, you can learn to mitigate your reactions. Being aware of things that might make you react in a negative way will help you to prevent them from having a detrimental effect on your team.

Being universally liked doesn't necessarily equate to universal respect. Understanding and accepting the things that make you and your team different is difficult, but can have a positive result. Whether it's age, sex, background or TV viewing choice, knowing and accepting differences will lead to far less conflict and improve productivity.

You may want to consider:

- speaking to colleagues or a mentor to get an external perspective on how you come across to others
- identifying triggers that bring out the worst in you, and finding a coping mechanism
- taking time to understand your colleagues and allowing them their individuality - it's not all about creating a team of carbon copies - it's about creating a framework for mutual respect.



#2

Motivate, engage and support

Measures of Success author, Mark Graban, points out that, “Bad managers tell employees what to do, good managers explain why they need to do it, but great managers involve people in decision making and improvement.”

Most people tend to do something because of what they will get out of it. From ground-breaking innovation through to identifying and creating a new, efficient process, your team members want to know they will be rewarded for the hours they put in. Make it a part of your role to discover what that reward is – whether it's financial, intellectual, prestige or simple recognition.

Make sure you engage with your team to create a positive environment where they feel valued and involved. Nothing affects team morale more than being given directives without understanding the reasons why. Involve key people and ensure that information and objectives are fed through to the most junior members of the team. Information is not power. Involving your team will encourage better collaboration and idea sharing.

Make sure you:

- keep an open mind about why the members of your team come to work
- are honest and open about why things need to be done
- make time for your team
- have a clear direction that you want the team to work towards.

#3

Communicate

Communication may be the single most important skill of a manager and pretty much all of the other skills you need to master depend on it. You can't be a leader if you can't communicate your vision. You can't motivate people if they can't understand what you want.

The good news is that you can improve your communication skills through practice. Ensuring that communication is strong is essential to team wellbeing and the overall working environment. While it may sometimes be difficult to encourage dialogue across all levels, it's best to create a culture of openness to ensure that everyone is heard. And don't forget that it's sometimes just as important to 'hear' what your team members are not saying - and dig through that to get to the truth.

Effective communication helps to avoid confusion and mistakes. Successful managers understand the importance of clearly articulating the company's vision, goals and objectives. Open and honest communication with your team is the best way to create the level of trust that produces a strong working relationship. Being a Secret Squirrel will lead to a range of negative emotions including mistrust, suspicion, wariness and even fear regarding the stability of the company and its future.

Managers also need to convey competence when they communicate. While your team won't expect you to know everything, they will expect you to be knowledgeable about the 'bigger picture' aspects of the business.

Don't forget the written word. Badly written, or too many emails can be the root cause of a great many issues within a team. If you have to use emails, work out the best way to approach this so that your team can use them as a tool for guidance and not feel that they are a lazy method of instruction or criticism. Get this right and your team will understand you better and you will spend a lot less time repeating things or apologising in another email.

Think about:

- What's the best way to communicate with your team?
- The best way to keep the team updated on strategic developments
- How do you sound in an email?

To-Do

- Complete sprint retrospective
- Meet Klara again
- Review report
- DL report
- Team lunch
- Client call 4.30pm

#4

Delegate

Delegating work to your team not only allows you to multiply the amount of work you can accomplish, but it also allows you to grow your team's confidence, leadership and work skills. Unfortunately, a lot of managers don't pay enough attention to the delegation process, and fail to reap the benefits.

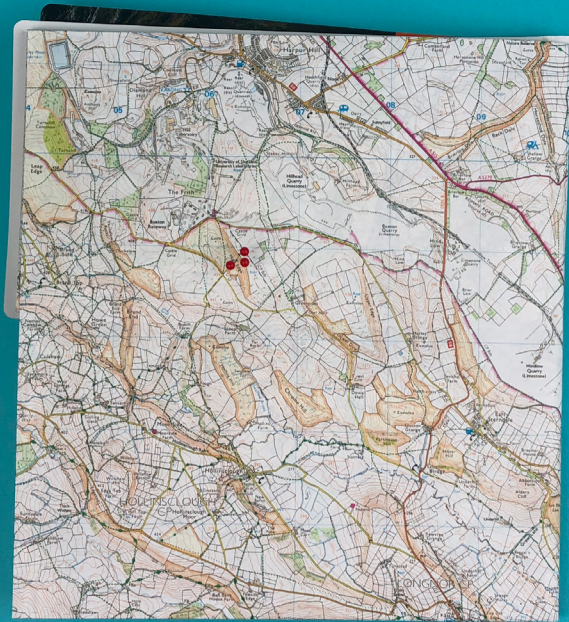
The art of delegation can be tricky to master, but it is something that you can learn and improve on. If you want to delegate effectively, make sure that your team members have a clear understanding of requirements and the responsibilities you are asking them to take on. Allow the person or the team to complete the task in the way they believe will be the most effective in obtaining the desired objectives. Telling them specifically how to complete an assignment is not an effective means of delegating work - it limits creativity and initiative while also diminishing self-esteem.

One of the most common mistakes when delegating is assuming that employees understand what you want, rather than making sure that they do. Confirming understanding only takes a minute, but is probably the most important determinant of success or failure. Take the time to listen to any doubts, questions or suggestions in advance so you can overcome those concerns. By involving the team in the process, you are also encouraging trust, support and open communication.

Accountability is also key to the process of delegation. Make sure that your team understands the need to regularly communicate with you about the status of the deliverable and the timing of delivery, so that there are no surprises at the eleventh hour.

Ensure you:

- give clear instructions and objectives
- don't expect people to read your mind. If they haven't grasped what you want, tell them
- allow team members to add their own value to the project
- encourage communication.



#5

Set clear objectives and give feedback

Everyone needs a goal to strive for. Not only do goals give direction and purpose, they also ensure that your team is working towards the overall goals of the business. Success depends on your ability, as a manager, to harness, direct and support your team and engage in delivering the company's mission and objectives.

Setting clear objectives for your team enables them to understand what their role is in terms of the goals of the organisation and to identify how their individual and team outputs can contribute to the success of the business. It will allow you to optimise performance and productivity as well as evaluate and measure it.

Employees are happier, more productive and more successful when they have freedom, flexibility, authority, responsibility and the opportunity to set and shape their work and career path.

However, don't just leave it there and forget about the need for constant feedback – whether positive or negative. Set up regular feedback sessions with your team so that you can review, evaluate and amend objectives.

Giving positive feedback can be a powerful tool for employee motivation, although there will be times when that isn't appropriate or effective. When you do need to give constructive negative feedback, make sure you do it in a way that will produce the desired results without creating barriers or bad feelings.

Don't be afraid of:

- an open objective setting process to allow your team to flourish
- helping your team to understand the strategy and goals of the business
- flexibility
- honest and open dialogue.

#6

Look after the team

Employee wellbeing is a growing concern in many sectors, especially the law. In recent years, we've been bombarded by reports telling us that young people will not want to stay in the legal profession because of a lack of work/life balance, and that people working in law are already among professionals with the lowest level of wellbeing in the workplace.

Stress, long hours, and high-intensity work all lead to people burning out or jumping ship. Ensuring that your team has a strong employee wellbeing strategy can have a number of benefits. As well as boosting morale, it can cut costs and make recruitment and retaining staff much easier.

But what does this actually look like? In reality, most managers need to be guided by the business as a whole in terms of what they can and cannot do for their team. However, that doesn't mean that you can't create an environment where you are the first person who knows if there is an issue. You need to embrace the in-house training your HR team provides to give you the confidence and skills to implement policies and handle difficult conversations with staff in a sensitive and effective way.

Along with allowing your team members the autonomy, responsibility and empowerment they need, you should also recognise the benefits of a good work/life balance, invest in training for your staff, and offer flexible working arrangements where possible.

Consider:

- creating a workplace where people feel comfortable confiding in you
- learning new skills and keep up to date with HR best practice
- being open-minded about different ways of working.



Conclusion

It is tempting to spend your time looking at how you need to impress your external stakeholders while crossing your fingers and hoping there are no problems with your internal team. However, as the bar is raised ever higher for you to increase efficiency and output, control budgets and reduce churn, the only way to achieve this is by having a team who are fully motivated, engaged and happy.

Looking at ways to be a better manager is one of the most important parts of your role. Sadly, it's also the one that slips to the bottom of the 'to do' list - and the one you generally get the least help with. Not everyone is naturally cut out to be a manager, and a lack of support or understanding of this has a high cost for organisations each year, both in financial and human terms.

Without a doubt, your primary focus will still be on running a successful business, where products and services are sold and money is made. However, making work a place where people actually want to be makes the process of achieving these goals a lot easier. Instead of having employees who look for every possible reason to call in sick, arrive late or go home early, companies who get the team dynamic right end up with a far more loyal and energised workforce.

Management is definitely a skill that can be learned. You can improve as a manager by working at it every day and by taking the time to remember to:

- Know what you want to do and make sure you get this across to your team. Trying to figure out what is in your head and then deliver it, makes their job a lot harder.
- Be honest and involve people in the bigger picture stuff.
- Ensure your team knows what to do, but don't tell them how to do it. Encourage people to think, innovate and be creative.
- Lead by example. If you expect a lot from your team, you need to give a lot yourself.
- Understand your team. Take the time to get to know your people and identify their strengths and weaknesses, their aspirations and their fears.
- Take care of your team.

We are in a privileged position at LOD to discuss issues like this with our lawyers and clients, and we've seen many different ways of managing a successful team. If you think it would be helpful to chat in more detail about some of the ideas in our Toolkit series, or other examples of in-house best practice that we've come across, do get in touch.



Other Toolkits in the series

Measure Your Impact

8 KPIs for in-house legal teams

Creative Problem Solving

5 stages of Design Thinking for in-house legal teams

Increase Your Influence

6 stages of positioning for in-house legal teams to impact business strategy

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