How to Build Successful Work Relationships with Paralegals and Assistants

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New attorneys often have varying comfort levels when supervising and working with paralegals upport staff, but attorneys should not overcomplicate their new role. Many new lawyers once paralegals or administrative assistants and can remember what they liked (or did not like) about the attorneys for whom they worked. The same holds for those of us who never set foot in a law office before attending law school: we've all worked for or with other people in one capacity or another. So, the first question you have to ask yourself is, "Would I want to work for me?"

David Brooks, an Opinion columnist for the *New York Times*, recently explained in an op-ed, "How to Build Trust: A Practical Guide," that "trust is built by leaders who create environments that encourage people to behave with integrity, competence, and benevolence." Simply put, leaders build trust when they "make people feel respected and safe."

Respect Your Colleagues; Don't Micromanage

You may be responsible for supervising a paralegal or assistant who has been at your firm or organization longer than you have or has more experience than you do. To make this situation work, make them feel respected and avoid micromanaging. Be clear about what you need from this person and the goals and deadlines for assignments or routine tasks. As Brooks says, you should "assume excellence." This means trusting your colleagues to do what you have asked them to do while allowing them to manage their own time and responsibilities.

Learn from Their Knowledge and Experience

If you are a new employee or unfamiliar with how something works in your office, ask. By doing so, you demonstrate respect for others' knowledge and experience. I recently found myself in this situation when I joined a new firm. I knew how to use the postage meter and create online shipping labels at my old firm, and I would occasionally mail out my filings. At my new firm, I had no idea how to do this. I asked my paralegal, who did not know either because our administrative assistants usually handled this task. We went to the administrative assistant and asked her if she [illegible] please show us how to mail filings in our office. The assistant was pleasantly surprised by [illegible] request. None of the other associates or paralegals had ever asked her before. Not only did my paralegal and I validate the knowledge and experience of another staff member, but we also increased our own capabilities (although we still regularly delegate this task), and we offered a couple of well-received ideas on how to improve the process.

Schedule Regular Meetings with Team Members

If you are running a team or department, be sure to have regular meetings (usually once a week) with your paralegals and assistants. When joining my new firm, I was surprised to learn that my predecessor did not have regular team meetings. Instead, she had an open-door policy where she assigned tasks at will or answered questions as they arose. An open-door policy is great, but it is not enough. Paralegals and support staff need a regular, consistent time to be seen and heard. Regular team meetings allow staff to talk about a challenging client or situation, share what they have been working on individually, learn from each other, and make sure cases are moving forward. As an attorney, this gives you a weekly deadline to review and return things to staff that you could not get to right away.

Make Time for Social Interaction

Social interaction is critical in creating a collaborative work environment. Beata Leja, a Chicago immigration attorney who runs a firm with 32 employees, says, "It is important to have time to interact with each other as people and not just as staff and employees." Leja encourages planning regular office social events and setting aside five minutes at the beginning of staff meetings for social prompts. At my firm, the partner once asked everyone to share something from their "bucket list." It was a fun and engaging exercise, and we all learned a lot about each other. Leja explains that this is important because to create a positive work environment, "we need to know each other *and* like each other."

To build successful work relationships with paralegals and staff, it is essential to: provide clear guidance and expectations without micromanaging, recognize and learn from the knowledge and experience of others, have regular team meetings, and get to know each other. This will help create an environment where everyone feels valued and motivated to do their best.

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