

The Influence of Great Legal Administrators

Successful legal professionals harness the power of relationships, networking, office politics, and new ideas to drive success in their organizations.

During my 20-plus years of working within law firms and almost a decade of serving law firms from the outside, professional law firm managers have impressed me most by their abilities to have influence well beyond the scopes of their job descriptions. Being a legal administrator can sometimes be a lonely job – neither part of the partnership nor part of the staff. Successful legal administrators leverage their networks to find ideas, support, guidance, and mentoring. The stories showcased in this article reveal how legal administrators can position themselves as strategic assets in an ever-challenging legal industry landscape.

Understand the Business: The Power of Knowing your Client

Who is your client? Knowing clearly who your client is within a complex organization quickly earns you credibility. It also provides clarity as you analyze situations and make recommendations and decisions.

Kathy, a Manager of Human Resources in a mid-sized law firm, was completely confident that her clients were the assistants. Her role, she said, was to provide the assistants with what they needed: to schedule their vacations, to counsel them, attend to their payroll and benefits administration – that kind of thing. She was focused on their needs, and they were loyal to her.



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President

Kathy didn't understand that her client was really the firm – the lawyers who were the front line with their clients. She didn't know who the firm's clients were or when there were large transactions in the firm. She also couldn't anticipate staffing needs, with her composure tested by last-minute requests and credibility doubted when she left matters under-staffed.

What could Kathy have done to be more successful? She could have learned from her colleagues to get a sense of where the activity was in the firm. She could have spoken with lawyers who seemed to be driving activity in an effort to anticipate their needs, and then put staff in place to support activities that generate revenue for the firm. By doing so, she could have earned credibility with both lawyers and staff.

Clients' No. 1 complaint is that lawyers don't take the time to understand their business. Meanwhile, lawyers' No. 1 complaint is that staff members don't understand what drives their business. In turn, administrators' No. 1 complaint involves the challenges they face in trying to serve their firms as their primary clients when 80 partners all claim to be the most important client.

Successful legal professionals take the time to understand the business. They know what drives revenue, what levers impact profit, and look beyond their functional areas to view the bigger picture.

Being Successful as a law firm administrator requires a lot of confidence and no ego.

Political Savvy: The Power of Getting Things Done

Successful people are politically savvy. They know who has influence and how to get things done. Other really smart people still can fail because they are not politically astute.

Jennifer, a Marketing Director, joined a law firm after working for about five years in a corporate environment, where the top-down management structure allowed – and, in fact, encouraged – roll-outs with lots of fan fare. Prior to a roll-out everything was a big secret – much like new car designs at auto shows, where the vehicles are covered with fabric until the drum roll sounds and they are unveiled with great drama and showmanship.

Jennifer thought this same style would work in a law firm. She and her group worked tirelessly to develop the firm's new identity package – letterhead, marketing materials, golf shirts for everyone, business cards for all – with everything to be launched with considerable fanfare, yet still kept very secret. She worked with a small committee of the partnership, but she neither consulted partners with influence nor collaborated with senior administrative management to make them feel part of a team. Poor Jennifer never recovered – she got the politics all wrong.

Jim had a much more politically successful approach. Jim was the senior administrator in a 15-office firm. He understood the politics in his law firm very clearly and had a great technique for getting things done.

Jim never “rolls” anything out. Instead, he utilizes small “pilot groups,” in which lawyers in the firm are invited to participate to try out something new. Jim appealed to their intellect by asking for their feedback and to their egos by making them feel like they were part of a special group. Ultimately, he got “buy-in” because he made them feel like they had a hand in developing solutions for the firm. Jim understands the politics, understands his client, and gets things done.

Reading: The Power of New Ideas

Most successful people are voracious readers. Oprah Winfrey once said she knew from a very early age that she could “out-read just about anyone,” which was and continues

to provide a foundation for her success.

When TLOMA member Ken retired after 17 years with a Toronto law firm, the partners “roasted him” at a dinner. They said that one of the things they would miss the most about Ken was that he was “the firm’s official reader” – reading business books that the lawyers had neither the time nor the interest in pursuing. He was always gathering new ideas and floating them – testing them – trying to apply them to the law firm.

People who read gather ideas. They shuffle them and build on them, and new ideas are formed.

In *The Act of Creation*, author Arthur Koestler says creativity “does not create something out of nothing; it uncovers, selects, re-shuffles, combines, synthesizes already existing facts, ideas, faculties and skills.” For administrators, their creativity ultimately drives their firms’ success.

The most successful people are not necessarily the most brilliant, but they are the most persistent. They set goals and go after them with great intentions. They learn new skills and are prepared to do things poorly in order to get better.

Another favorite political success story involves David, who says “in 20 years in this firm I’ve never had a good idea.” His style is one of quiet conversation. He gives partners ideas to consider and gets them talking amongst themselves. He nurtures both the partners and the ideas until good approaches bubble to the surface. His style is to make sure that the partners come up with the ideas, and then David breathes life into them. David gets things done.

David, Jim, and Jennifer were all highly capable of working in a complex organization. They all had great communication skills and creativity, and all showed leadership in their own ways. Jennifer, however, wasn’t sensitive to the context of a law firm. What they had in common is the ability to generate new ideas – which makes sense because they are all readers.

Keep Growing: The Power of Learning

What is the difference between participating in life and observing it? Observers watch other people take risks, learn new skills, or face their fears. Meanwhile, participants get out there and do things. They push their boundaries, learn new skills, take risks, and learn a lot about themselves and others.

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It is easy to stick to what you know. It is much more difficult to question ways of doing things in your law firm because it means change, creates challenges, and requires more personal energy. Push your limits, gather new ideas from what you read, and create change in your law firm. It keeps you fresh, engaged, and one step ahead of the law firm

you serve, but also helps you to set boundaries and have a sense of control.

Saying No: The Power of Taking Control

How often do you feel out of control? Taking control means learning to say no!

Susan, an administrator of an 800-lawyer firm with several offices, was confident, assertive, and had an uncanny ability to manage her priorities. Her office was clearly occupied by a busy person who had several major projects in progress. Nevertheless, Susan always had an open door – she always had time for people, but she never took their problems onto her back. She would listen to the problem and would always give people three choices: Do you just want to vent? Do you want to talk through some solutions? Do you want me to act on this? Almost always people just wanted to vent. Sure, there were things that required Susan's action, but many didn't. In a way, she didn't really have to say no because she gave people options.

Bob, on the other hand, said yes to just about everything, and when a partner turned up at his door with a problem, his standard response was "leave it with me." Bob was buried in paper, projects, and other people's problems. Bob was unable to plan his time effectively or to set priorities. He was out of control and lacked confidence because he would not or could not say no.

Sometimes saying no requires courage; it means standing alone, supported only by your values. Nicole, a Human Resources Manager in her firm, was concerned when her new managing partner wanted to fire the firm's receptionist. He wanted someone younger and, in his view, more attractive to greet the firm's clients. This is but one of a list of things Nicole was directed to do. Her values, her ethics, and indeed the law told her this wasn't right, but she really felt that she was standing alone. She was prepared to quit – but she held her ground and said no.

The better you are at saying no, the more you are in control at the office. In turn, you'll need more help from your "network," your support base, and your friends.

Nurture Your Relationships: The Power of Your Network

Networking is essentially an exchange of resources. The currency of networking in business is economic – things such as money, information, and services.

The currency between friends is often emotional – friends work together, play together, travel together, and support each other. They celebrate your successes and pick you up when you're down.

Unsuccessful people activate their networks only when they need something. This form of networking is insincere and gratuitous. For successful people, networking is like breathing. They are sincere; they know networking is more about giving than taking, and they don't keep score.

Nowhere is networking more active and successful than in the many associations within

and surrounding the legal community. The 12 global organizations that co-sponsor Professional Legal Management WeekSM (PLMW) publications and events are lifelines for many law firm administrators. As a new administrator in a new city many years ago, my business network through the Toronto Law Office Management Association (TLOMA, now known as The Law Office Management Association) helped to ground me in the job, in the community, and in my new city.

Self Preservation: The Power of Taking Care of Yourself

People who look after themselves have a presence when they walk into a room. They exude confidence and send out signals that they are worthy of your attention.

Anne looks after herself first. She attends aerobics classes, she always has a great haircut, and she combats stress by taking occasional days off to go to a spa or simply read a book. Anne's approach really works for her – at work and at home. When she walks into a boardroom at the office she exudes confidence. She is brilliant and articulate, but she has credibility before she even speaks. She is worthy of her colleagues' confidence and attention.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth puts her children first, her job second, her community service third – and so on. Like any great mom, she'll make sure her kids make it to every activity and have the best clothes and the most up-to-date hair styles – but she doesn't have time for herself. Elizabeth has credibility problems with her colleagues; the other administrative managers in her firm and the partners see her as lacking confidence and a presence. If she is not worthy of her own attention – a haircut, a manicure, and properly pressed clothes – how is she worthy of their attention? Elizabeth makes sure her staff members have what they need, and she has so much work that she often doesn't eat all day. By about 3 p.m., her blood sugar is so low that she snaps at her secretary and at a young lawyer who asks her a question. In turn, she has a reputation for being really hard to work with. Perhaps she is, but she might be less so if she took time to look after herself.

Compare these two women and learn from them. If you don't look after yourself, you won't have anything to give. Think about juggling five balls in the air: your health, family, friends, spirit, and job. Four of these balls are made of glass and one of rubber – if you lose your job or change jobs, you can always bounce back. If you crack or break your health, family, friends or spirit, it is much harder to get those back.

The Definition of Success

Success ultimately means different things to different people. What's clear, though, is that the most successful legal administrators possess levels of influence well beyond their job descriptions.

Being successful as a law firm administrator requires a lot of confidence and no ego. Your success is not measured by the widgets you produce; instead, it is directly correlated to the influence you have on other people.



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