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THERE ARE TIMES IN “THE NEW NORMAL” WHEN “THE OLD NORMAL” IS THE ONLY WAY

The picture isn't so rosy at a number of firms right now.

Some of the normally hot practice areas are not-so-hot. As a result, productivity is down and revenues are down or at best flat. Meanwhile expenses are up so profits are down and partner draws are down. And certain knowledgeable observers of the legal scene describe the outlook for the rest of this year and the first part of next year as “grim”. This all adds up to a growing discouragement and even pessimism in some firms.

As the old song says, “We need a little Christmas, right this very minute.” But how can a firm's leaders bring a little Christmas, raise morale and even restore some sense of optimism?

The answer isn't to give “rah, rah” speeches or keep telling the attorneys to work harder. What they want and need is support and coaching that produces ideas about ways to do something different and an action plan to implement them. The great sage David Maister describes it this way:

“It is a program of non-billable time budgeting. It's not goal setting. It's action planning. Goals are made up of a wish list. An action plan is concrete, specific and much more motivating to a depressed [or discouraged] person.”

This support and coaching must come from the Managing Partner and, depending on the size and structure of the firm, others in firm management. They need to listen to each attorney's complaints or tale of woe, then say, “Let's now discuss four or five things you can do differently” and finally help the attorney draft an action plan.

To accomplish this, the leaders must spend non-billable time themselves but this will be productive non-billable time. Furthermore, this support and coaching can't be accomplished by firm meetings, tele-conferences, e-mails, voice mail messages or even Skype. The leaders must get out of their offices, walk the halls and even travel to all the other offices, no matter where they are, in order to meet with each attorney face-to-face, one-on-one.

Yes, in this age of high technology and the New Normal, face-to-face is still the best form of communication at certain times. You might call it “The Old Normal”.

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