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HOW TO NOT GET A SEAT AT THE TABLE

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I've had many conversations recently about administrators being recognized as strategic thinkers and how they can participate in executive committee meetings, strategic management discussions and decisions in the forward direction of the firm. This topic has more interest as law firms shift into becoming high-focus businesses. There isn't much market share for the firm who doesn't operate with some business savvy, and having a legal administrator at the management table is important to the future of the firm — if they are contributing!

One complexity in a law firm setting versus a corporate office is the owners (shareholders, partners, members, etc.) are active in day-to-day operations. In a corporation, the shareholders show up once a year for a meeting on their stock and then go away until the same time next year. This complexity adds focus on your interpersonal skills. Communication is a differentiator in any service organization and is critical to your role as a leader. Communicating across all levels of your firm earns respect and trust of those around you — up and down the food chain. Motivating and inspiring those around you is also a critical component of leadership, and with leadership, trust and respect you have your best opportunity to be a part of the strategic development and direction of the firm.

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And, if you're wondering what **not** to do, well, I've got a few things to share:

1. BE THE NAYSAYER OR THE CRITIC Consistently shoot down the new policies and procedures being rolled out through you. Or even better, speak disparagingly about the decision makers to your staff or to other managers or colleagues. When you aren't part of the affirmative decision, be part of the management where you represent it as though you were. If you have a strong reason to disagree with a decision, raise those concerns with the executive committee members behind closed doors. In other words, don't air your dirty laundry for all to see.

2. COMMUNICATE POORLY When you deliver your message, is the audience paying attention to you or are they talking amongst themselves? Have you caught yourself droning on-and-on — in meetings or email — in front of groups or one-on-one? People who over explain or ramble are often avoided. Think about your own interest in someone who goes on-and-on in their explanations or stories — do you stay "with them"? Be clear and concise, especially in your emails. Answer questions directly and ask questions with succinct clarity. Be careful to respond with clear direction and re-read your message before you hit send.

3. MAKE IT ALL ABOUT YOU Getting a seat at the table which directs your organization requires you to put the organization first. Bragging about your accomplishments, or talking incessantly about your life doesn't engender the trust and inclusiveness required of a leader. Taking a seat at the table where forward thinking strategy is discussed requires you to put the organization ahead of you – at least with respect to your conversations and sharing around the office.

4. BACKSTAB CO-WORKERS When you have conflict with someone else confront it head on, tackle the tough conversations with timeliness. Resolving conflict with positive outcome is an important indicator of leadership potential. Think about your own reaction when you hear a friend saying negative things about a mutual friend. Likely you make a note to yourself to be wary of future conversations as you fear you could be a target one day. If you have an issue with someone, bring your courage and integrity forward and demonstrate the personal authority to resolve it efficiently and effectively.

5. BE TEFLON If you apply the concept of nothing sticks to your role in the firm, then you avoid all responsibility for things going wrong. Take the high road of accountability and responsibility rather than pointing a finger of blame elsewhere. Acknowledging your mistakes is an element of being human, and a great way to show you are interested in the success of the firm by taking your role seriously and responsibly.

6. REST ON YOUR LAURELS You've been at the firm forever, so of course you deserve a seat at that table! Your tenure, your experience, these are two pieces of the pie. Consider ongoing education, continual personal development, and building trust and rapport as three other pieces that are important investments that you must make regular deposits in.

7. DRAMA KING/QUEEN Go ahead and make everything a crisis or an emergency. Why not? Running on adrenaline is fun, energizing, and exciting! It's also a terrifically easy way to be so caught in handling the latest spill in the break room that you miss the discussion about changing staffing ratios in the coming year, or building a new practice area by absorbing a smaller firm. Be effective in your management, delegating where possible, adapting when required. Establish the important points in your responsibilities, and allow those around you to shine in the areas you pass off to them.

While there are no guarantees these items will get you to the strategic table where decisions for the future of the firm are handled, there is a good guess that any of these seven will prevent you from that opportunity. Step up whenever possible, bring your even temperament, solve with the future in mind, and accept responsibility when appropriate. What is your next step toward your seat at the table?

For more information and further reading on Communication & Conflict Management, visit our online library.

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Judy understands teams. And she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, finance, and legal management to help law firms improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

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