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The 'Hope' Promotion

By Michelle Golden

Ever regret promoting someone to partner or manager? "We figured she'd start building her practice once she had the title" or "He knew we expected him to leverage his work once he was promoted." Comments like these abound in firms of all sizes. Why do we expect behaviors to transform once the title of partner is bestowed?

Some motives for promoting—potential you see; rewarding loyalty, longevity, or technical competence; protecting client relationships or your investment in skills and expertise; or advancing an unready person because you're promoting their ready peer—are faulty reasons for admitting a new owner.

When owners decide to "promote now, groom later," they don't usually achieve the desired result—effective post-promotion grooming. And, contrary to their intentions, having under-performing partners may deter future partner and merger/acquisition prospects, thus threatening the firm's succession.

Worse yet is the impact on morale. Tolerance of mediocrity sets a low standard for remaining personnel, strongly and negatively impacting morale. The message to others in the firm—who are usually more aware than the owners of a promotee's weaknesses—is: "Mediocrity gets rewarded." If you've lost promising professionals following such a promotion, it was likely due to their reduced confidence in the owners' abilities and a choice not to be part of something with which they disagree philosophically.

The problem is urgent. The pool of potential owners is dwindling with fewer good people out there and greater overall risk in the profession. When it comes to ownership, many of today's young professionals tell me they just don't see it as an advantage. For survival and competitive

advantage, it's important to institute corrective actions promptly:

1. Identify and quantify "Great Owner" criteria: required competencies and behavior standards. You may wish to also identify desirable (but not required) traits, as well. Here are some criteria to consider: service ethic, ability to communicate the value of the firm's services, instilling confidence of others, relationship quality with staff and clients, team player mentality, strategic thinker, integrity, and approachability.

2. Evaluate today's partners and managers against your criteria and institute programs to get everyone up to par. Implement an annual 360° review process.

3. In a good-natured way, promote what you're doing throughout the firm and explain why: that you intend to attract, grow and retain top professionals and strong leaders. Make your programs available to all interested people.

4. Acknowledge improvement and create a graceful transition for those better suited for a director role, a different practice area, or who may need to exit.

5. Going forward, require important behaviors to be consistently demonstrated, pre-promotion.

Although your initial thought might be that others will perceive your firm as too tough an environment for advancement, only the lazy will see it that way. Go-getters will recognize the superior quality leadership and you will be more attractive to excellent people.

Lastly, if you are in this situation, don't beat yourself up—this is a widespread issue and there are solutions. Remember that compensation can impact measurable performance; but for partner qualities and fit, compensation isn't the driver, doing the right thing by your firm must be the driver. **PA**