

Administrators to the Rescue

Taking Charge and Staying Out of the “Riffed” Pool

BY ED POLL

“Stop the world, I want to get off!”

As many people who have been laid off from their law firms in recent months must feel, the title of the popular Broadway show seems to say it all: Put on the brakes before the world spins out of control.

More than 10,000 lawyers and staff have been let go from so-called “Big Law,” but who is keeping track of layoffs in smaller law firms? But, then again, who is counting anymore?

What started me on this thought was an e-mail exchange I had recently with a friend. Over the years of our working together, I had worked with a woman at my friend’s company when he was absent. Let’s call her Jane. During a recent call, I learned that she was no longer with the company. I asked my friend what happened to Jane. He said that she “...is the last RIF ...” I could not remember the meaning of the phrase.

DID YOU SAY RIF?

According to Wikipedia, the acronym “RIF” means a reduction in force. Sadly, there are many variations on this shortcut, such as IRIF (involuntary reduction in force), VRIF (voluntary reduction in force), eRIF (e-mail reduction in force), and WFR (workforce reduction). According to the Wikipedia segment, the abbreviation is often pronounced like the word riff rather than spelled out. It’s sometimes used as a verb, as in “the employees were heavily *riffed*.”

THE NEW REALITY

In the publisher’s column of a legal weekly published in April, David Yas quotes a young, laid-off lawyer as saying: “If you were ever going to be laid off, this seems like a good time. ... In the past, there was a stigma (about job loss). Well, now, it seems like every third person you meet has been laid off. So there is empathy, a sympathy, like we’re all in this together.”

Because so many lawyers and law firm staffers have become victims of the economic downturn, the stigma of a layoff seems to have been lifted. But don’t tell that to the hard-driving, type AAA lawyer, or to the staffer who has been given only a week or two of severance pay.

Many individuals’ psychological issues are associated with today’s economic troubles, issues that many lawyers and their firms’ equally achievement-driven administrators and staff may have never had to confront before. Included in these issues is the entire concept of “work-life balance” and benefits in the workplace.



Administrators are best positioned for opening the dialogue and evaluation that allows for change in their firms.



In today's challenging circumstances, administrators who raise key issues facing their firms can position themselves as the allies, instead of opponents, of their lawyers, and avoid getting sucked into the growing "riffed" pool.

Deborah Keary, a director at the Society for Human Resource Management in Alexandria, Virginia, told the *Los Angeles Times* that, "Work-life balance policies fall into the category of 'nice to have'..." But, when you are worried about the mortgage and your job, everyone is more focused on staying employed, not workplace niceties.

The definition of recession is when *someone else* is laid off; the definition of a depression is when *you* are laid off. In other words, when the problem comes close to home, we just might go into "panic" mode. Until then, we tend to be sanguine; it's *their* problem, *not mine*.

In talking with a lawyer last night, I asked him how his small-firm practice was going, and if he had suffered any loss of revenue. His response: Clients are either not paying or paying more slowly than before. And, because his revenue decreased "only" by 15 percent, he considered himself lucky.

Daily, I'm receiving more calls from lawyers who want to meet the challenges of the new economic reality, as well as from lawyers who want to sell their law practices and either retire or go into another endeavor. Some want to challenge the "panic attack," and some want to step aside. Either course of action would have a direct impact on the administrators and other staff members in their firms.

WHAT TO DO NOW

I have several suggestions that I believe can benefit every firm. Administrators can play key roles in getting these suggestions adopted and implemented. Lawyers tend to be more skeptical, impatient and intense, and less receptive to attempts at help that they too often see as criticism. But, in today's challenging circumstances, administrators who raise key issues facing their

firms can position themselves as the allies, instead of opponents, of their lawyers, and avoid getting sucked into the growing "riffed" pool.

First, take a deep breath, many deep breaths. Nothing good happens when we "starve" our body and our mind from the oxygen they need to operate. Our breath is the primary engine that keeps us going. Then:

- **Look at the expenditure numbers.** What do you need to live? What do you need to keep your law practice operating? Be open and honest with yourself. Consider where you are in the economic spectrum and think about reducing where you need to in order to keep your head above water.
- **Review your revenue numbers.** One good jump here usually will offset many small reductions in expenditures. Where has revenue decreased? Why? Is it because your clients are also in panic mode? Is there something you



can do to help by “partnering” with the client, or deferring a portion of your fee as long as the client pays a base minimum, or finding another creative billing alternative? How can you show clients the extraordinary value you provide them that will allow them to make significant profits?

- **Make a to-do list.** After considering the pros and cons, the revenues and expenditures, and lifestyle adjustments that may be required, make a “to do” list. Be very specific. Set a timeline that tells you, realistically, the date on which you will do the given task. If others can help you to achieve certain tasks (whether for a fee or as a favor) to expedite your recovery and deliverance from panic mode, ask and delegate. This is not the time to be proud; this is the time to be quick and effective.

TAKING CHARGE

Administrators are best positioned for opening the dialogue and evaluation that allows for change, specifically the kind of change the firm’s current circumstances require. Administrators who take the initiative on these challenges can make their firms stronger, demonstrate the worth and value of what they do, and enhance their job security. It need not be a matter of administrators telling lawyers what to do – it should be a process of understanding what everyone should do together out of mutual self-interest.

Let me end with the beginning. There is hope. Thousands of people are reaching out for help and receiving it. We will overcome. We will get and retain new clients by showing them the value of what we provide. And we will walk proudly with those who have weathered this storm and come out the stronger for it. ✱

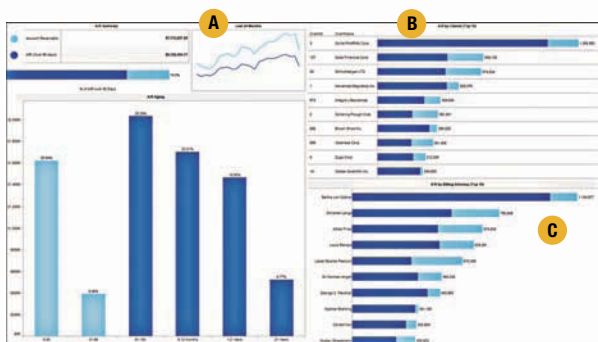
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