

## Practice Tips...

# When Staff Goes on the Warpath

Sometimes I wonder what we learned in law school. Law school did not teach us how to negotiate a case or try a lawsuit, or how to manage a law firm staff.

Law practice does not necessarily teach us how to deal effectively with our staff either. I have seen superior lawyers who regularly scream at their staff. I have seen superior lawyers who frequently fire staff members. All of this occurs at considerable cost, both financial and human. I thought it might be instructive to share with WSTLA members some recent problems in our office, and how we worked with our staff to reach solutions.

At our firm we pride ourselves on being efficient. We have forms, procedures, manuals, rules and regulations, you name it, we've got it. About a year ago we thought we were pretty efficient. As my partner and I learned, we were wrong.

Our staff was not happy. We learned that our staff was not happy in a six-page single spaced memo to which every staff member contributed. Let's just say there were a number of issues.

The partners' first response to the memo from staff was anger. My partner and I put our heart and soul into making the firm run and *this* gets dumped on us? Fortunately, we did not act on that anger. Instead, we hired a consul-



*Robert K.  
Dawson*

tant. We went to a person with specialized employee management skills and sought advice on how to respond. He gave us a four-step process for resolving staff disputes in a law office. Here it is.

### First Step

The first step is to thank your staff for their input and indicate that you will address the issues they raise. In our case, there were so many issues that it was clear we were going to have to do some research and analysis before responding. However, the first step was to acknowledge receipt of the information. Even if you don't like what your staff has said you can at least be thankful that they provided the information rather than leaving the firm or letting office morale deteriorate further.

### Second Step

The second thing you can do is immediately address the problems you can. In our firm there were some fairly simple issues that could be discussed and quickly acted upon. Our consultant felt that it was important that we take prompt action on some of the issues. If your staff sees that you are solving the simple problems, they will understand the need for you to take some time to solve the more difficult issues.

### Third Step

The next thing you can do is gather information and research the difficult

(Continued on page 19)

## Practice Tips

(Continued from page 3)

issues. In our firm, some of the staff dissatisfaction related to issues which required that we consult with our firm's attorney on the legal consequences of our decisions. Also, you need to find out what is really on your staff's mind. This means you need to ask questions, and really listen. In our case the partners had some strong personal feelings about some of the issues that had been raised. Therefore, we had the consultant sit down with the staff and gather specific information.

### Fourth Step

Hold an office retreat. One of the best things that we have done as a firm was to hold an office retreat and to have the consultant run it. The consultant had gathered information by interviewing each of the staff members and was able to analyze what the major problems were. Then the consultant put together an office retreat to help us address those issues. We closed down the office on a Friday and took the entire firm to a nice location where a meeting room and food was provided.

We didn't solve everything in one day. However, we made some substantial changes in how the office runs. We made changes in how office problems will be addressed in the future. We also ended up with a list of issues that remained to be addressed, some ways of going about it, as well as a timeline for completion. We didn't meet every deadline on the timeline, but we came reasonably close.

A year ago our staff was near mutiny and nobody in the office felt appreciated. Since that time the office works much better. Our word processor has made a number of suggestions for how the attorneys and others submit work to her. She is much more actively involved in improving the day-to-day aspects of the office. Our legal assistants speak up when something bothers them and we try to address issues as they arise. Our receptionist/office manager and file clerk are more appreciated, and we make better use of their talents.

If you are a busy lawyer and working hard on your cases, it is easy to overlook staff problems that are occurring in your office. It is important, particularly in a small office, not to let these problems grow. You have to provide an outlet for people, and an avenue for change. We are so satisfied with the outcome of the office retreat that we have decided to do it again this year.

There are a number of management experts around town who can assist you in dealing with management problems that arise in a law firm, or help you plan a firm retreat. The person that we happened to choose was Greg Toy, president of Employee Management Services, Inc. in Seattle, 283-1264. We will use him again.

*Robert K. Dawson is a partner in the Seattle firm of Pence & Dawson; his practice is limited to plaintiff's personal injury cases.*