

## On Management

# Selecting a Chief Operating Officer

Four qualities your COO must have.

**H**ow do you spot someone who will be particularly well-suited to the chief operating officer or executive director position? During my 11 years as chairman of an Am Law 100 firm, I was privileged to work with two extraordinarily talented people who occupied the COO/executive director position. They were smart. They were team players. They were widely respected. As individuals, they were very different. But both exhibited the following characteristics:

**1. Intellect.** The first thing to seek in a senior administrator is superior intellectual horsepower. Lawyers are smart people and are often skeptics as well. These qualities frequently lead to a low tolerance for management, creating flash points between professional and administrative staff. A senior administrator must be able to stand toe-to-toe with the firm's lawyers—to think clearly and quickly, to speak forcefully, and to not only manage well but also be able to convince the firm's partners that effective management is critical to the firm's success.

**2. Interpersonal skills.** A senior administrator has two key constituencies—the firm's support staff, for whom he is responsible, and the firm's partners, to whom he is responsible. A strong COO or executive director must be able to function smoothly with each group, respected as a leader by the firm's staff and as a peer by the firm's partners. Strong interpersonal skills are indispensable in this regard.

**3. Teamwork and collaboration.** Lawyers are trained to be objective and dispassionate. While these qualities can be assets to a practicing lawyer, they often lead to an unhealthy level of interpersonal detachment in office relationships that can cause friction.

In fact, most law firms tolerate a certain number

of lone rangers in the partner ranks. But these same characteristics can be shortcomings if present in a senior administrator. A law firm COO or executive director must be a consummate team player, someone who can work collaboratively with the diverse elements present in all firms and bring them together in a way that promotes the firm's long-term best interests.

**4. Trust.** There is nothing more important than trust in the law firm environment—or in any other environment, for that matter. A firm's senior administrator must work tirelessly to earn the trust of his key constituencies. Trust is built through shared experiences over time—through honesty, open and candid communication, fairness, a commitment to shared values, predictability, and a willingness to admit mistakes and to correct them.

Can the relationship between the professional and the administrative staffs be a flash point? Sure it can. But it doesn't have to be. If your senior administrator meets the four standards listed above, you'll be well on your way towards helping to create an environment in which the lawyers and the staff work together as one. That's an environment in which all firm constituencies, including clients, benefit.



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