

No Jerks Allowed

BY HARVEY FREISHTAT AND TIM WATERS

Years ago, a new partner in one of our offices was overheard berating his secretary. He was promptly informed that that type of behavior was not tolerated.

At the same time, another attorney in that office was commenting on how quickly colleagues had responded to his e-mail seeking information on a client matter.

Down the hall, partners from several practice groups conferred with partners in other offices about the most efficient, effective way to assist a client in a complex business transaction.

All of these examples illustrate a policy that has guided hiring and personnel decisions at McDermott, Will & Emery for as long

Law Firm Administration A Special Report

as anyone can remember. A recent *Harvard Business Review* article, "Breakthrough Ideas for 2004" (February 2004), describes McDermott's policy of screening out "tyrants, bullies, boors" in recruiting both law school graduates and experienced attorneys.

McDermott's emphasis on teamwork is an essential component of the firm's recruitment process. We undoubtedly seek top talent. However, we also look for professionals who understand that unified and cooperative efforts lead to better results for the client.

The importance of our "civilized, professional teamwork" policy doesn't diminish once an attorney walks through the door. It is regularly referenced during firm meetings. Moreover, ability to work as a member of a team is a critical element in associates' and partners' annual performance and compensation reviews. Even our various offices are regularly critiqued on their ability to share work with other offices. To be sure, individualism is valued. However, it must be accompanied by team-oriented skills and inclinations.

The policy directly influences the way we practice law. For many years, McDermott has encouraged partners from different legal disciplines to form client service teams across traditional departmental boundaries. For instance, the firm's health care practice began as an interdepartmental effort more than 20 years ago to provide better solutions for healthcare organizations.

The firm's policy is strictly enforced. Attorneys who are disrespectful, difficult to work with, and excessively ego-driven don't tend to last long in this firm. They either change their ways or move on. It doesn't matter if they're rainmakers—if their attitude is destructive, this is not the place for them.

Why should attorneys' behavior toward others merit the attention of the top leadership of our firm? A civilized, respectful work environment is undeniably important. The policy's benefits, however, extend far beyond attorney and employee satisfaction.

We consider it a key tool in delivering client service. Today's complex global business environment requires a vast network of professionals with expertise in increasing numbers of specialties and their utilization in multiple jurisdictions. The need to work together—across practices, offices, and borders—has never been greater. Our recruiting and retention policy is an essential part of a firm culture that puts a premium on teamwork.

What results have we seen? Approximately one-quarter of our firm revenue is derived from client work referred from one of our offices to another. That kind of result is possible only in an organization where people respect each other as members of a group whose single-minded focus is the client.

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