

Ask A Mentor: How Can I Help Associates Turn Down Work?

By **Marina Portnova** (December 5, 2023)

Experts answer questions on career and workplace conundrums in this Law360 Pulse guest column series. Have a question you're afraid to ask your law firm chair, practice area leader or mentor? Submit it anonymously here.

In this installment, Marina Portnova at Lowenstein Sandler LLP shares advice on helping junior attorneys set healthy boundaries at work.

Q: When I have to reach out to my team with urgent demands during evenings and weekends, I fear I've ruined people's plans, when there is often a workaround. How can I encourage junior attorneys to speak up and help them set boundaries?

— Partner at BigLaw firm

Thank you for the excellent question.

First, let's acknowledge that working in BigLaw is demanding. When clients hire us, they expect high-quality service, often with tight deadlines.

The intensity of the job shouldn't be a surprise to junior attorneys. And in my experience, it isn't. They understand the pressures our clients face and the fierce competition our firm must contend with. It's simply not an option to deliver less than excellent client service.

But that doesn't mean junior associates need to be miserable and sacrifice their happiness or health. Too often, young attorneys believe that to gain the experience they need and advance in their careers, they must always prioritize work over everything else. They wrongly think they should never say "no" to an assignment or request from a partner.

Undoubtedly, many senior partners tend to tap associates for work who are eager for experience and always say "yes." Whether consciously or unconsciously, junior associates internalize that lesson and fear that they can never say "no."

But it doesn't have to be that way. With the right support and guidance from their firms, colleagues, and mentors, junior attorneys should be able to manage their workload. I would argue that the longevity of their career depends on it.

In the last few years, major law firms have come a long way in recognizing the need to keep their best associate performers energized and engaged. Many clients, too, have shown more interest in developing associates at their outside firms. Countless studies have shown that happy, healthy employees are more productive and creative.

So, how do you create a balance ensuring clients are served at the highest level and junior attorneys receive the needed experience without burnout?



Marina Portnova

Here are some ideas to consider on how to encourage junior attorneys to speak up and help them set boundaries.

Prioritize personal connections with associates.

Feeling free to speak up and set boundaries requires trust, and the only way to establish it is through personal exchanges over time. Trust can be established more quickly with intentional daily interactions demonstrating genuine curiosity about their lives outside work. With the frenetic pace of work, it's easy to neglect these interactions. But they can pay dividends over the long term.

In the ideal world, junior attorneys will feel they can trust you to support them when they need to decline an assignment, and you'll have better insight into their lives and what matters most to them.

Set clear expectations.

As I wrote above, junior attorneys must understand what partners expect. It serves nobody if we lead them to believe that some personal sacrifices will never be required — that their career trajectory will not be affected by the hours they are willing to put into their job. But we should also be clear about what expectations we don't have of them as well.

As a partner responsible for managing several client accounts, I set higher expectations for myself. But I make it clear to associates that they don't need to do the same.

Encourage teamwork.

No attorney should be considered indispensable, no matter how talented. That's especially true inside big law firms with the resources to fill gaps. But, for the firm to effectively leverage those resources, it needs associates to speak up about when they need time off or will not be available to work. A shared calendar for establishing on-call help after hours could help. Ultimately, the idea is to create a team-like atmosphere where associates are supported by their colleagues and don't feel like they're all alone.

I recommend that partners should also communicate in as much detail as possible. Not every assignment is an emergency, and partners have a responsibility to let junior attorneys know if work after business hours is truly required.

Consider investing in executive training for junior attorneys.

I have worked with plenty of associates who can't seem to say "no" to an assignment. While that kind of person can sound like a dream to some partners, it doesn't always work out that way. First, they can overextend themselves, leading to missed deadlines or poor performance. Second, their readiness to say "yes" can lead to unhappiness, which can poison a culture if their feelings are allowed to spread.

It's especially painful to see valued contributors unhappy. For those individuals, it may make sense for the firm to invest in a personal leadership coach to help them develop time-management and communication skills. I've seen this approach result in positive changes,

including increased confidence in communicating the need for time off.

Of course, not every attorney will require their own personal leadership coach. It may be appropriate to simply encourage overwhelmed associates to speak with their mentor or a personnel administrator.

Help build a culture that respects boundaries.

Today's culture prizes and rewards people who are industrious and busy. Maybe that's how it should be. But that doesn't mean we should stigmatize or negatively judge people who set appropriate work-life boundaries. We can and should encourage it.

If an associate needs to take time off to care for a sick family member or wants to celebrate an anniversary, they should not feel self-conscious.

Partners can help. First, they shouldn't penalize the associate by taking away opportunities to work on important assignments. They can also demonstrate curiosity and compassion toward those who need time off and help enforce boundaries to ensure they are truly off.

Getting junior associates to speak up for themselves is not easy. It requires showing a commitment to their well-being over time. But I believe if you put in the work, the dividends will show up in happier and more engaged associates.

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