

## **Best Practice Clinic: Review and planning pays off**

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IT IS IMPORTANT THAT TEAM MEMBERS at all levels in a law firm reflect on their successes, and learn from their errors. Review is an important part of the organisation's continually improving the way it operates, and without it we are likely to miss opportunities to develop, or repeat the same mistakes.

It is also important that planning is incorporated into a firm's routine. Regular planning can help ensure that deadlines, including limitation periods, are met, client service expectations are met or exceeded, potential problems are identified and resolved before they manifest themselves, workloads are kept manageable, assistance is provided where required, quality and service standards are maintained, and matters are not left to the last minute.

Review and planning help a business with continuous improvement, risk management, client relationships, service standards, training, mentoring, staff satisfaction, and ultimately the bottom line.

### **The problems**

On a number of occasions in our firm we have had staff who experience problems tell us they feel their supervisor or team leader has not been available to assist them with a difficulty, query or concern. As a result, staff have either taken it upon themselves to carry out work unsupervised, or have attempted to correct a mistake without informing anyone. Anyone who has been in business for any length of time, and especially in legal practice, will realise this is a recipe for disaster.

We have also found that staff can fail to keep their supervisor informed about problems with workloads, and allow their duties to get on top of them – increasing their stress levels and reducing their performance. Despite telling staff that we were happy for their feedback about workloads, it seems that, prior to implementing our review and planning system, staff felt they didn't know how or what to tell their supervisor or team leader about the problem.

A further problem we experienced on occasions was with poor or non-existent planning for annual leave, which created problems and frustration for the people who had been left to cover the workload.

And, though we routinely asked our people to have medium- and long-term goals, and tasks to go on with when their immediate or urgent work slows, they did not follow this through.

### **The best system is often the simplest**

To kick-start the process, and put in place a routine that resolves a number of practical problems, the simple system adopted in our practice may be of some help, though we certainly do not propose it as a complete solution to review and planning.

The system involves a monthly review and planning meeting between each team member and their supervisor. We have developed a simple checklist for this process, which prompts the team members to discuss certain areas and record notes and comments. The checklist is stored for future reference and review.

The areas to be discussed include problems or concerns for last month; problems or concerns for the coming month; current workload; urgent, difficult and important upcoming work; training and

information required; plan for any annual leave; review file audits, case notes and PIRs; and review medium- and long-term projects.

We keep the system simple by ensuring both team members and their supervisors know that, if there isn't a great deal to discuss, they can go through the checklist quickly, perhaps under five minutes, making appropriate comments and checking that they have covered each area.

On the other hand, if more time needs to be spent on a particular area, we suggest setting aside time for discussion, and ask for any relevant materials or files to be brought to the meeting.

The management and administration team organises the meetings and follow-up to ensure they are held regularly and completed promptly. We have found that once our people are in the habit of participating in the meetings they come quite naturally.

We also suggest that the supervisor and team member actually go away from the pressures and constant interruptions of their email and telephone system for the meeting, so that each employee feels they have their supervisor's full attention, and a chance to discuss any concerns and go through training issues in detail.

The checklist is to be used as a prompt or guide to the discussions the employee should have with their supervisor, but anything within the ambit of their employment is generally open for discussion.