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WHAT MAKES FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP, ACCOUNTABILITY OR RESPONSIBILITY?

“Leadership: Direction, guidance”

“Accountability: Being required to answer for or explain”

“Responsibility: Authority, obligation or duty”

The Oxford Dictionary

Even before the economic situation began impacting the legal profession, “Leadership” was already becoming one of the most discussed subjects in countless articles, essays and seminars. Now “Accountability” is becoming one of the most frequently used terms in strategic planning and management. Attorneys are more and more being required to be “accountable”, not only for their performance, but also for fulfilling assigned roles in implementing the Strategic Plan and performing management functions.

Holding the members of the firm accountable is, to a degree, important. But there is a problem. “Accountability” has a negative connotation. As the definition above states, it requires people to answer for or explain their actions. Instead of emphasizing accomplishments and successes, accountability tends to focus on lack of accomplishment or failure.

On the other hand, the concept of “Responsibility” is positive. Electing a person to a responsible position such as Managing Partner, or asking someone to assume responsibility for a major function such as Practice Group Leader or Task Force Chair, indicates trust and confidence in the attorney’s ability to fulfill that responsibility.

The most effective leaders, in a law firm or in any business or organization, welcome and thrive on responsibility and the obligation to provide the direction and guidance that go with it. Furthermore, because so much responsibility is placed on these leaders, they have learned one of the tenets of successful leadership: They delegate certain responsibilities, and the authority that must go with them, to others in the firm.

Responsibility vs. accountability is not a matter of semantics. It reflects a basic understanding of human nature. Most people (attorneys included!) do not like to be held accountable. But they do welcome and usually thrive on being responsible. It is no mystery that the firms that are surviving and even thriving today have a culture in which everyone in the firm welcomes and assumes responsibility for the survival and success of the firm.

Robert Denney Associates Inc. provides management, marketing and strategic planning counsel to law firms throughout the United States and parts of Canada. Reports and discussions of other timely issues are posted on our web site, www.robertdenney.com.