

## Climbing the Ladder > column



By Sherman Kruse  
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### Assisting your assistant

**M**ost young associates struggle with managing their relationship with their secretaries. I recall, as a know-it-all first-year, how intimidated I was by the mere idea of even having my own secretary, much less someone significantly my senior who seemed to know much more than I did.

I felt awkward and impolite informing him of his errors, never quite knew which tasks were his and which were mine, and did not have a 'system' in place for how things would get done. As time passed, however, I developed some guidelines to help myself develop a successful relationship with my assistant. Here are just a few.

#### Respect and partnership

I am not sure which is worse: rudely degrading one's assistant for his mistakes, or never providing him criticism of any kind. One creates the same hierarchy that has partners degrading associates, breeding a tense and unhealthy office environment. The other results in repetition of the same mistakes, and a poor job done, leaving those who actually pay the bills — your clients — dissatisfied.

I think a nice outlook to have is one that avoids viewing one's relationship with one's assistant as a hierarchy. Instead, look at it as a horizontal distribution of tasks to members of the same team, each of whom has different training. Each person's contribution is vital to the success of the team, and each person is respected for his role. This also means, of course, that each person should take responsibility for his part. Perceiving your assistant as essential to your success and respecting his role therein will automatically change the nature of your dialogue, permitting for constructive criticism as well as positive feedback that is productive.

#### The work divide

What is "my job" and what is "my secretary's job" can be a difficult question for young associates to answer. The associate writes the briefs and goes to court, and the assistant does the copying and time entries. But outside of those clear-cut divides, things get blurry.

Generally speaking, your assistant should generate transmittal letters, notices, and certificates of service. Whenever you receive written discovery requests, he should scan the documents and convert them into Answer form. He will usually generate documents, so that when you are drafting a motion, for example, you *start* from a document that already has the caption, the name of the document and the signature block. He should also do all of your filings and keep pleadings, correspondence, discovery, and research binders. Assistants to transactional attorneys also run redlines and create closing binders.

If you still have questions, I suggest permitting your client to provide the answer. If the task at hand is something that the client should not be paying hundreds of dollars an hour to get accomplished, then it is secretarial. Having said that, at the end of the day I always do what needs to be done to get the job done; so if my assistant is very busy with another project and it will take a minute to make my own copy, I do it myself.

#### Feedback and communication

One of the most important lessons I learned is to openly communicate with and provide constant guidance to my assistant.

An open line of communication is the best way to actually get the work done. I strongly suggest working out a system with your assistant for completing every-day tasks. How often he should check your out-box or how he

should answer your phone should be worked out from the start. How and where he should file your documents is also key.

For instance, when documents land in my in-box, I typically put Post-its on them with instruction to my assistant on what should be done with the document, who should receive copies of it and where it should be filed. I.e., a discovery request would have this Post-it: "Pls convert into Answer form, pdf to me, cc BES and RIY, & file ALPD-02/Discovery."

If there are problems, then address them right away. Waiting until "review time" before informing one's assistants of his strengths and weaknesses is a big mistake. When my assistant does a good job on a project or takes initiative, I drop him a note and thank him for a job well done — and I carbon copy the HR department. When he makes a mistake, if it is one that he often repeats, I'll let him know that too. There is no reason to delay improving the workings of this essential relationship simply because it isn't yet the end of the year.

#### Responsibility

Proofread everything, because whether you accept it or not, the truth is that *you* will be held responsible for the work that comes out of *your* office. It is, therefore, not only inappropriate to blame your assistant for errors, but also ineffective.

Remember that your relationship with your assistant is one of the most important ones of your professional life, and like all other relationships, it will have its ups and downs. Devote yourself to improving it through respect, feedback, and communication, because that will provide not only efficiency and productivity, but also a relaxed, respectful, and enjoyable work environment. ■

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