

Sweet C-team

How to build—and keep—
an effective C-level



By Richard Gary

Let's say you're the firm's COO or executive director. You have a select group of C-level executives reporting to you—chief officers in charge of functions such as finance, human resources, knowledge management, marketing, operations and administration, technology, and the like. You respect and like the people who hold these positions, and they perform well. So, given the highly competitive legal services environment in which we all work, how do you retain these individuals? How do you keep your team together?

The Hiring Process

Retention starts with hiring. Select the right people at the outset, and retention becomes a more attainable goal. Some useful tips to follow in the hiring process:

1 Base your hiring decisions on both technical competence and personal fit. Sometimes the best candidate for the job isn't the best candidate on paper. A resume with an impressive list of accomplishments can sometimes mask personality weaknesses. Look for people who you believe have the right mix of experience and interpersonal skills. Find people with whom you'll enjoy working—and who you believe will work well with others in the firm. Chances are, the feeling will be mutual.

2 Trust your instincts. Most experienced managers have learned this lesson over the years, and it's an important one, especially when it comes to evaluating people. Hiring the right people is a process that involves both objective and subjective elements.

3 Hire people who are smarter than you, especially in their area of professional or management responsibility. Your own history and expertise are already available to the firm. Hire people who will supplement the firm's management resources in a meaningful way.

4 Finally, hire people who will be good team members—who will make important individual contributions but, at the same time, align their personal interests with the success of your firm and its management team.

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Day-to-Day Operations

For the sake of argument, let's assume that you made the right hiring decisions as you built your C-level team. Now, how do you keep that team together?

1 Communicate constantly. Create an atmosphere where, to the extent possible, there are no surprises. Keep your C-levels fully informed, consistent with requirements of propriety and confidentiality. Provide them with the same monthly operating reports that are distributed to partners. In law firms, as in the corporate world, access to information reflects one's status in the organization. This practice not only keeps your C-level executives fully informed but also signals to them and to others that they're considered peers within the firm.

2 Outline the responsibilities of your C-level executives clearly and completely. Work closely with them to develop job descriptions that will not only guide them in the fulfillment of their duties but also help you clarify the roles you want them to play.

3 Give constructive feedback and candid performance reviews on a regular schedule. Encourage the members of your C-level team to keep improving. Ask them how you can help.

4 Help your C-level executives understand how their performance affects the success of the firm as a whole. It is the organization's responsibility to explain this connection. The benefit to the individual is an enhanced sense of value and purpose. The benefit to the organization is an atmosphere conducive to high performance, i.e., the delivery of best efforts by everyone connected with the organization.

5 Invite your C-level executives to partner meetings and retreats.

This will facilitate the development of closer working relationships with partners and a better understanding of the firm's strategy and culture.

6 Involve your C-levels in critical planning exercises. Most successful firms take full advantage of the wide range and depth of experience of their senior administrative staff members, whose views are both sought and respected by the firm's partners.

In some firms, however, partners behave as though they're members of an elite private club. C-level executives are excluded from key decisions, and their access to information about the firm and its operations is restricted—all under the rationale that non-lawyer administrators have no equity stake in the firm's long-term success. These firms underutilize their senior administrators, and retention often becomes an issue. Firms with open, inclusionary cultures utilize their C-level people far more effectively.

7 Treat your C-level executives fairly in terms of compensation and benefits. Create incentive plans that include a bonus based on not only individual performance but also firm profitability or performance in relation to budget. Such plans give C-level executives a direct stake in the firm's operating results and, to that extent, align their financial interests with those of the firm's partners.

8 Encourage your C-levels to take advantage of opportunities for continuing education and training at the firm's expense. This includes participation in industrywide groups like, for example, the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA) and the Legal Marketing Association (LMA).

9 Treat your C-level executives exactly as you want to be treated by both partners and peers. Be prepared to stand up for your C-levels if you believe they are being

poorly treated by others (especially partners)—and insist that they follow this practice themselves in their own departments.

10 Give your C-level executives enough room to carry out their responsibilities. Get out of their way. Don't micromanage them. Let them know that you trust them to do their jobs.

11 List your firm's C-level executives on the firm's Web site. This is an excellent litmus test of a firm's commitment to, and respect for, its senior staff members.

12 Finally, deal with mistakes promptly and directly. This is important—not only because the firm needs the right people in the right positions, but also because it sends the right message to the rest of your C-level executive staff. And remember that firms and people change. Sometimes firms outgrow people, and C-level executives who met all the requirements of a position ten years ago may no longer meet the requirements today. As the firm's chief C-level officer, it's your responsibility to recognize these situations and deal with them directly and humanely. ■

Summary

The best way to retain a C-level team is to hire the right people and then create an environment in which they can flourish—where they are well rewarded for their services and well respected for their contributions. Twenty-first-century law firms require high-performing C-level professionals to succeed.