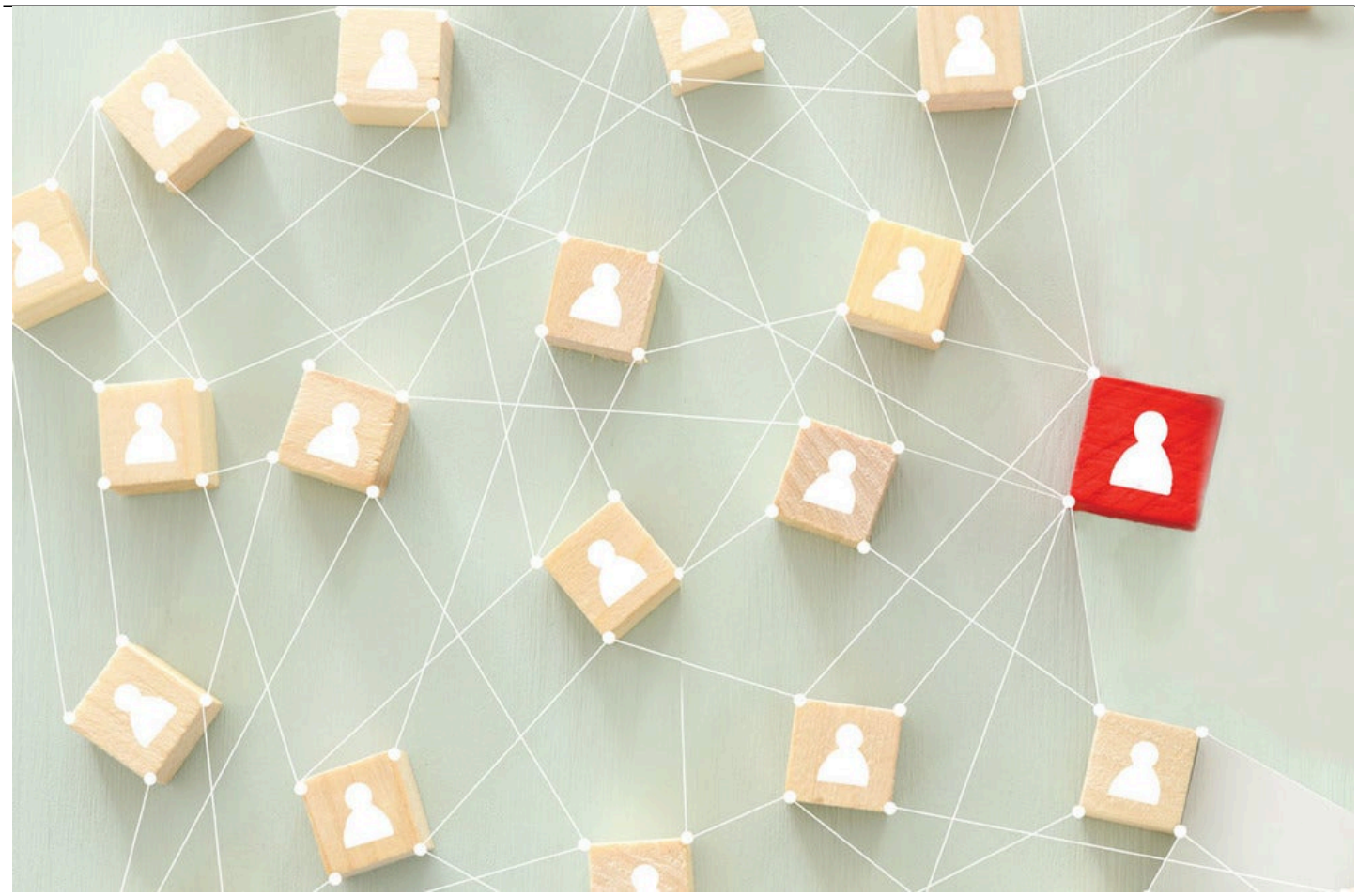
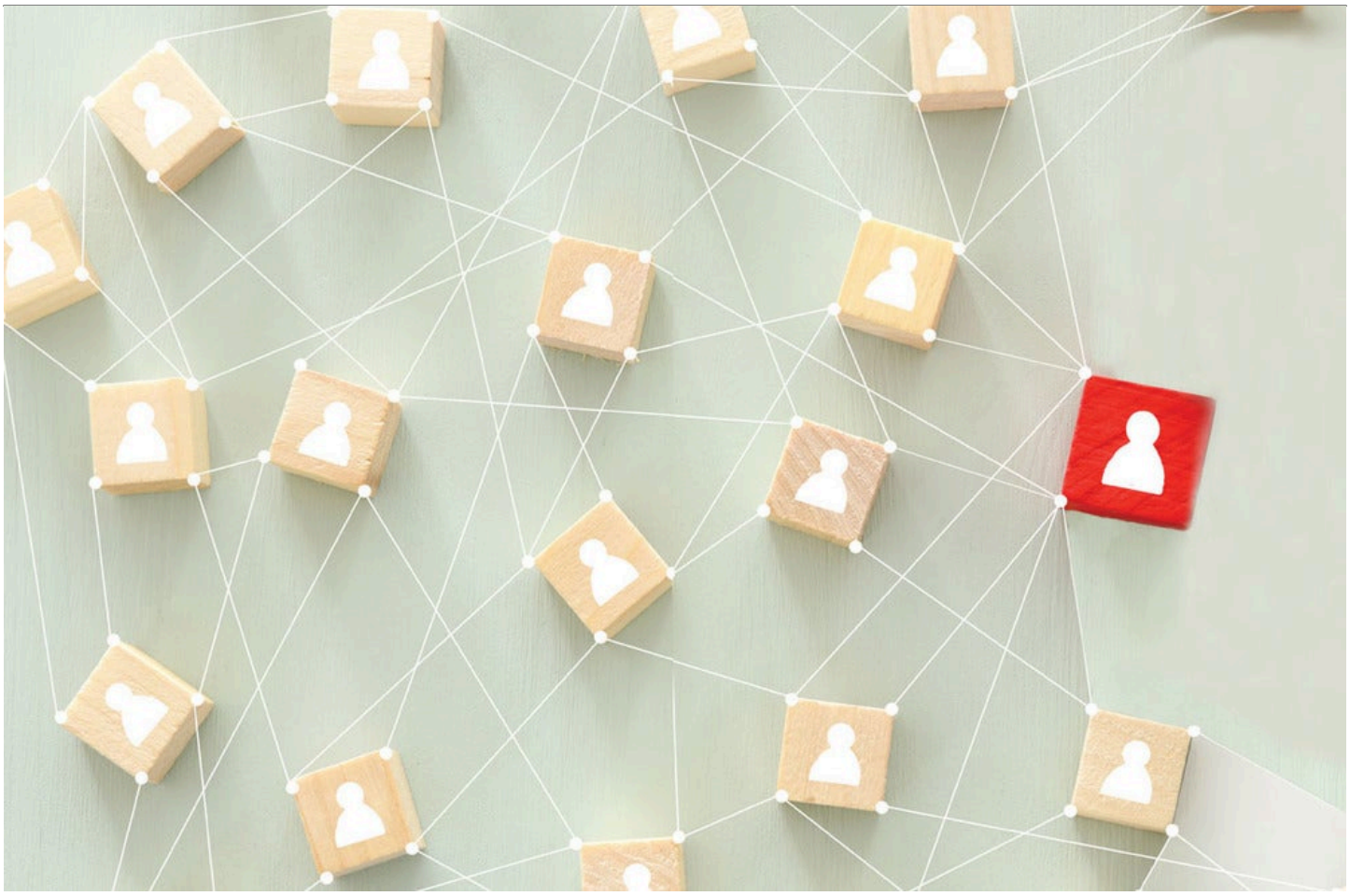


There’s No Magic Wand for Legal Leaders: Overcoming 10 Common Challenges in Managing In-house Teams

Law Department Management





CHEAT SHEET

- ***How to create an inclusive environment.*** Take an active interest in your team members as individuals, schedule one-on- ones, and solicit feedback regularly.
- ***How to increase productivity.*** Lead by example with your work/life balance, set priorities, delegate, and find tasks that can be done away with completely.
- ***How to give feedback.*** Building on a foundation of trust is essential, in addition to sharing observations in a timely manner while not overloading the team member with too much feedback.
- ***How to ask for help.*** Acknowledge that no team leader can know or accomplish everything by themselves. Embrace that giving and receiving help is necessary for success.

Almost six in 10 in-house attorneys report having manager responsibilities. At least some of the remaining four will have those responsibilities in the future.

In short, managing people is a significant duty for the majority of in-house lawyers.

To succeed they need skills in diverse areas, such as communication productivity, workload management, and team member engagement, among others. Unfortunately, the bar exam is no

magic wand. Law school and early work as an attorney rarely, if ever, provide that palette of skills.

This article will discuss common challenges you may face in managing your legal team in these areas and others, and present practical recommendations on how to overcome those challenges to develop a high-performing professional team.

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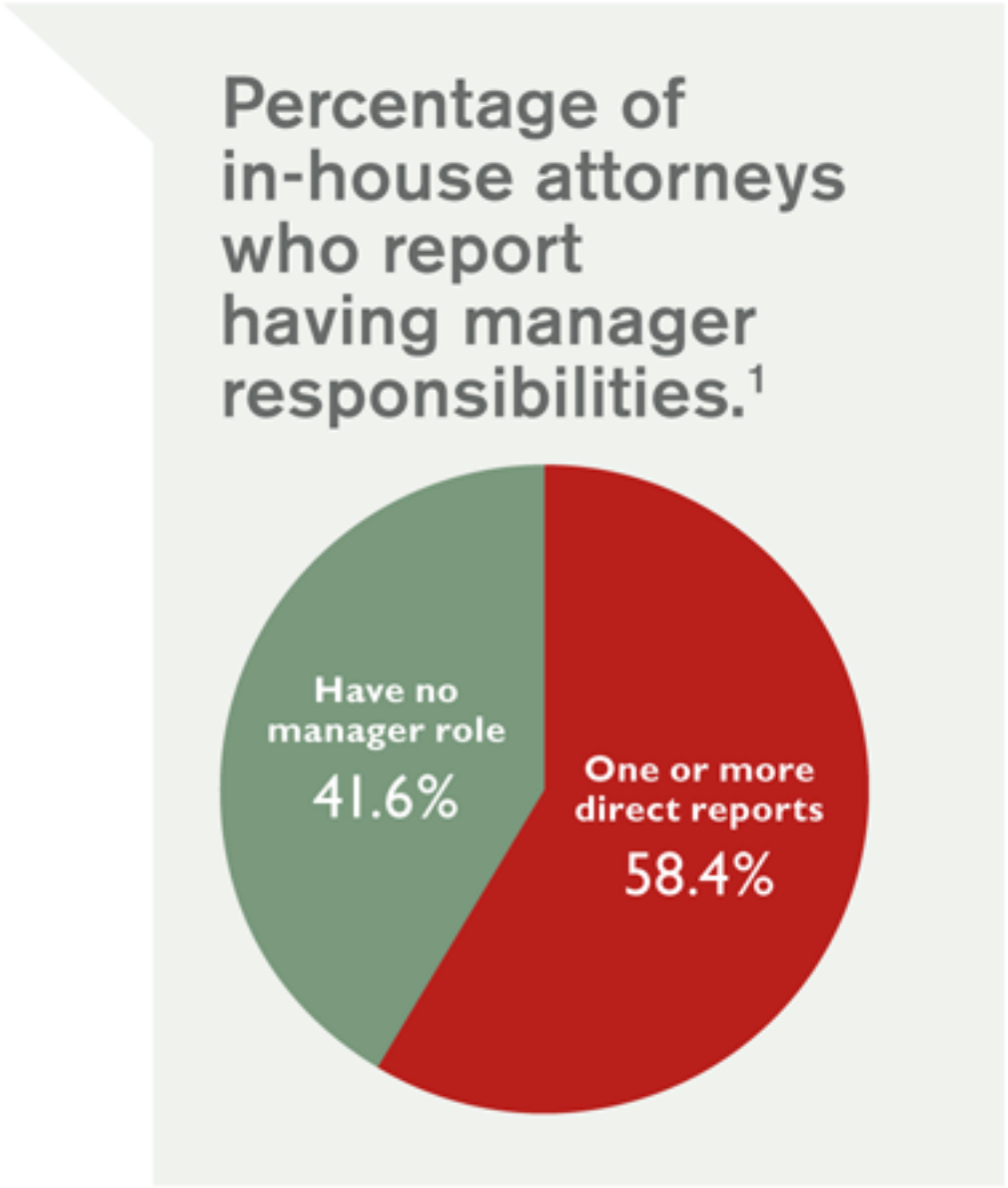
1. Listening

The first challenge encountered during the transition from individual contributor to team manager is an emphasis on listening skills. Team members rely on the manager's input to help flesh out issues and formulate solutions. More generally, they need an engaged manager to understand their value to the team and the company. So managers must move from telling what they know to hearing what other people know.

It is here you may feel overwhelmed as a manager. Getting to know your team members in a real way, learning about their career goals, skills, challenges, likes and dislikes, hobbies, and family members, can aid your understanding of team members' perspectives.

Giving undivided attention to team members during one-on-one conversations will help team members feel valued and appreciated. Genuine curiosity and focus, exhibited through artful questioning, also builds strong individual relationships with each team member. Listening to and taking business partner feedback seriously can provide insights into how a team member works with the business partner directly. It is important to seek out this sort of feedback regularly, especially if it's not a formal company process.

Percentage of in-house attorneys who report having manager responsibilities.



Compiled by ACC using data from a survey of 1,216 members, with 710, or 58 percent, self-reporting that they had at least one direct report.

One-on-one conversations also help create an inclusive environment within the organization for individual team members. The importance of an inclusive work environment for employee satisfaction and retention is well documented. An inclusive work environment is one where team members are comfortable being themselves at work — as opposed to conforming to a particular social norm. When the manager takes an active role in learning about the team member, the foundation for individual acceptance and inclusivity within the organization grows. Exhibiting a genuine appreciation of what is important to team members in their work and personal lives is the cornerstone for workplace inclusivity. Consider sharing one's own failures and mistakes at the right time to help further the relationship (and inclusivity) through authentic examples of your personal and professional growth.

2. Being productive

Another area where your authenticity as a manager counts is when you set a good example for your team through your own efficient time management and organization. Your team looks to you as an example for how they too can maintain a work-life balance. Being conscious of your own division between work and personal time can help your team learn to manage their own work-life boundaries.

One way to help is to find things that you and team members can stop doing. This is known as work overload. You may think everything you do is important, but if you are honest with yourself, there may be work that can be automated, delegated, or stopped altogether. Prioritize your work and stop doing those tasks at the bottom of the list. You will be surprised to learn that you can find time you did not know was available to you. No one will miss those tasks at the bottom of the list. If you are uncomfortable with this approach, consider finding another resource (machine or human) to take on those tasks instead.

Rather than just asking someone to take on the task or project, consider the adage: “If you ask for money, you’ll get advice. If you ask for advice, you’ll get money.” This trick works just as well in the office. Ask if your colleague has thoughts on how to handle a particular matter or can provide back up support to you on a task, rather than directly seeking to add a project to your colleague’s plate. You’ll be surprised how often they offer to take it on.

3. Delegating

The ability to delegate, accounting for the team’s work and deliverables, is a crucial skill and a core function reserved for the manager. For the new manager, delegating can be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. This skill is not typically necessary or useful for the individual contributor. At the same time, those who are on the receiving end of delegation may already feel that they have full plates, or, with or without justified cause, feel that they are receiving more assignments than their colleagues.

When possible, include your team in the delegation discussions to increase transparency and create ownership opportunities. When this isn’t possible, take care to explain the project’s impact and how it fits into the bigger picture. Clearly define the desired outcome and identify any constraints. Established deadlines, including expectations for progress reports, help managers and team members stay on track and avoid unnecessary delays.

Your goal is to match the right team member to the delegated matter, based on experience, responsibility, and level of authority. You want your team to be stretched, yet comfortable with their ability to achieve the reach, so that they can take ownership of the assignment. You must know your team, their capabilities, and their comfort level.

4. Work overload

This is the flip side of the coin: On one side is delegation, and on the other, work overload. Like Newton’s third law of motion, every act of delegation has an equal and opposite reaction on the workload of your team members. Successfully navigating the two sides is where the manager can positively affect team performance.

You are responsible for running interference for your team. Protect them from unnecessary tasks or work that should be handled elsewhere within the organization and assist with escalation only as needed. Fight to get them the tools and resources they need to be efficient and do their best work. Help them to prioritize. When workload becomes an issue, reconsider matter intake and allocation of

workload, and whether changes in resource allocation are necessary.

Regardless of whether you think you are doing all the right things in managing the workload, check in with your team frequently to gauge their stress levels and comfort. Although an open-door policy helps, it is only helpful when it is used. If you haven't heard from one of your team members in a while, be sure to check in with them. On these occasions, don't have another agenda — just be there to listen. Ask probing questions so you fully understand any concerns. Then consider providing advice and recommending next steps.

5. Role clarity

As the manager, it is your responsibility to ensure team members clearly understand the individual roles of other team members as well as those outside of your team. A basic but often overlooked step is maintaining relatively up-to-date job descriptions. Revisiting job responsibilities on a regular schedule is good hygiene — it keeps everyone's responsibilities current and can also help with succession planning.

Terminating an employee: The hard stuff

Whether terminating an employee for financial reasons, a reduction in force, or poor performance, the decision is not easy. The termination brings up a wide range of emotions for the terminated employee, the manager, and the remaining team. Navigating that storm of swirling emotions is a challenge.

Some tips include:

- Meet privately in a face-to-face setting.
- Be professional, and act ethically.
- Be up front and clear about the reason for termination; no small talk.
- Listen, without being defensive.
- Where performance is not the reason for termination, thank the employee for their contributions to the company.
- Be genuine in wishing them well in their future endeavors.

If appropriate, it may also be beneficial to support the employee post termination, including severance, COBRA reimbursement for a period, outplacement services or recruiter support, and where permitted by company policy providing references for future employment opportunities.

At a minimum, the team should be advised the former employee is no longer with the company. Although this is the safest approach, depending on your team's dynamics and what is permitted, you may also want to communicate the reasoning behind the company's actions, without sharing private information. It may be important to your company to address any concerns or fears your team may have concerning the future of the team, without making any promises. If the team already knew that the termination was justified, there may be little in need of repair. But if the news was not anticipated or understood, workplace expectations will need to be re-established.

And don't forget yourself. While your focus initially is on the terminated employee and the team, and properly so, after the fact you may need to re-center. This will be a stressful event for you, and you

should make sure you care for yourself. Take a walk, read, or talk with your mentor or significant other. Whatever works for you.

Remember that the treatment you give the terminated employee today impacts not only the employee being terminated, but your remaining team. They may justifiably assume that at some point in time, they will be treated the same as they walk out that door. Assure them through your actions today that when that time comes, they will be treated with respect and dignity.

Regular team meetings can often uncover hidden overlapping responsibilities that would ordinarily never come to light. As part of your scheduled review also consider the appropriateness of certain tasks for the level and experience of each team member. Finally, encouraging your team's efforts in understanding the business not only assists with completing substantive work but can also clarify the division of labor between lawyers and business teams.

6. Giving feedback

The art of providing effective job performance feedback to team members requires the appropriate groundwork: trust with each individual team member. If the relationship is not centered on trust, then team members will not internalize and act on the feedback you provide. In turn, the enterprise will suffer. One size does not fit all in building trusting relationships with team members — adjusting your leadership style in accordance with the individual personalities on the team is important to build credibility and buy-in. Team members are looking to see that you are authentic, can provide them with needed assurances for the future, and, most importantly, that they can rely on you to watch out for their welfare.

Trust is also built when team members are aware of the expectations for their job performance. It is up to you to ensure objectives are specific, realistic, and reasonably attainable by the team member and communicated clearly in line with the company's policies. By so doing, your team can execute against the objectives efficiently and you have a baseline for holding them accountable for achieving those objectives.

One size does not fit all in building trusting relationships with team members — adjusting your leadership style in accordance with the individual personalities on the team is important to build credibility and buy-in.

You should regularly share your observations on performance with team members in a timely manner. Be mindful, of course, not to overload them with feedback because too much can be demoralizing. Similarly, generously share business partner feedback with team members to aid your analysis for consistency and relevance to the team member's role in the enterprise. Where team members have more substantive skills than you do in a certain area, appreciating and complimenting such skills helps maintain trust. Any performance issues, however, should be handled immediately and in accordance with company policies (see sidebar "Terminating an employee: The hard stuff" for tips on termination).

7. Clash of titans: Egos

As noted above, attorneys whom you manage may require little in the way of direct supervision on day-to-day substantive matters. In fact, the attorneys or para-professionals you manage may feel superior to you as the manager — perhaps they have more time with the company, are older, or have more substantive experience with some of the legal issues the team handles. Sometimes, it might just be a conflict of individual egos.

You can't ignore the problem, and there are some steps you can use to address the situation such as:

- Set clear directions and goals with your team;
- Manage less by not micro-managing tasks; and
- Give full control to the individuals who can handle it.

With the above in place, have a mutual understanding that the individual now has accountability for the task and completion of the goal.

It is also worth mentioning that nothing is more frustrating — or sows the seeds of discontentment more than not giving credit for a job well done, or worse, taking credit for a job well done by others. Generously give your team the credit for the wins they deserve.

8. Motivating and engaging employees

Many in-house attorneys seek to grow their careers but lack the necessary self-awareness to do so on their own.

Managers can assist these individuals by identifying growth opportunities and developing a tailored development plan. While in-house counsel are typically strong in certain substantive areas, growth opportunities often exist in the areas of soft skills. The lack of soft skills can unknowingly derail an ambitious in-house counsel's career development.

Examples of common growth opportunities include writing skills, leading effective meetings, presentations to senior leaders, public speaking, team collaboration, business acumen, cross-training, decision making, appropriate escalation, and management of others. Of course, adding new substantive areas also leads to professional growth, particularly for departments with limited promotion opportunities. You should not overlook cross-training team members or volunteer opportunities in legal organizations like ACC.

A constructive conversation with a team member who is welcoming of personal development ideas can have a positive impact on that team member's career. Although it can be easy to put off such difficult conversations, legal department leaders who address such individual issues head on can have considerable impact on their team's success, as well as the success of their enterprise.

9. Team dynamics

In addition to trust between you and each individual team member, it is imperative to create an atmosphere of trust and collaboration among team members. The manager can do this by intentionally developing good interpersonal skills, with minimal conflict. One way to do that is to create opportunities for team members to interact both personally and professionally. You should consider avenues for team members to develop relationships among themselves to learn from and

mentor one another. Team building exercises, formal mentor programs, team offsites, and meetings (virtual and in-person) all create instances for team members to share and discuss their priorities and work projects.

When conflict arises — and it inevitably will — do not tolerate bullying or other bad behaviors between team members. Respectful discourse and conflicting views are appropriate, though keep an eye out for chronic bullying. Ask yourself whether the behavior is limited to one situation or whether it is a pervasive tactic being used by a team member to gain an advantage. A one-and-done situation can likely be handled with individual conversations with each team member, whereas pervasive behaviors ought to be addressed more broadly through the appropriate corporate channels at your company.

If, of course, you have made a mistake in team management, it is always best to admit to it and explain how things will be different in the future. Then follow through with the corrective action.

10. Asking for help

There are reasons asking for help can be uncomfortable for a manager. We may believe that, as the boss, we should be the expert and know the answer. Or, we may fear that others will perceive the ask as a weakness or lack of leadership. We feel vulnerable.

Yet, we can all intuitively answer this rhetorical question: If everyone on the team including the manager developed the same answers to the same questions, would the enterprise benefit? The team develops stronger solutions from the diversity of thought and knowledge, and you, as the manager, should model an open dialogue that builds on the strengths of your team. Ultimately, the results for the enterprise will be better — so everyone wins.

> **The truth is that no one ever got to where they are today without the help of others. Embrace the thought that giving and receiving help is necessary for the team to succeed.**

The truth is that no one ever got to where they are today without the help of others. Embrace the thought that giving and receiving help is necessary for the team to succeed. The first step is to overcome your vulnerability and admit to yourself that you can’t — no team leader can — possibly know or accomplish everything asked of the team by yourself. Asking for help from colleagues, team members, and business partners can only further the mission of the enterprise. Encouraging team members to find solutions with others should not be viewed as a failure but rather to connect your team with experts throughout the organization.

Parting thoughts — what would Harry Potter and friends do?

Your objective as a manager is to help your team succeed in ways that matter to both the business and your attorneys’ professional development. Although a magic wand cannot overcome the challenges of managing your team, then, the role of a manager of a legal team might more realistically compare to *Harry Potter’s* Professor Snape and Hermione Granger’s potion work. Your “potion” as manager includes such ingredients as fostering knowledge sharing, removing obstacles, listening and giving feedback, and supporting professional growth, to name a few of the recommendations here.

When those ingredients are combined in just the right quantities, you will have the right potion for developing a high-performing professional team. By influencing and guiding your team to develop their talents in this way, you will be at your best as a legal manager.

ACC EXTRAS ON… Managing teams

ACC Docket

Creating Operational Excellence: Improving Efficiencies for the Legal Team (June 2020).

Lead the Way: How to Build a Successful — and Borderless — Team (June 2019).

Leadership Lessons: Mark Roellig Reflects on 45 Years of Working (Nov. 2019).

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