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Creating a Culture of Ownership and Accountability

This Brief is based on one segment of a presentation on performance evaluations and effective feedback given at this year's AICPA Practitioners Symposium by consultant Jennifer Wilson of ConvergenceCoaching LLC.

Do the people in your firm own the responsibilities they're given or are they just helping out on one project after another? When staff members feel that they are truly in charge of a certain area of expertise, they are more likely to stretch themselves to do their best. They will appreciate the chance to take pride in ownership and will likely feel a greater connection to the firm, which is a great retention advantage. Practitioners should make sure that everyone on their team owns something, no matter how small.

Owning vs. Helping

There is a definite difference between taking ownership and simply assisting with a project. Ownership has some key characteristics. An owner is a person who must take responsibility for the assignment, fix it when something goes wrong and keep it thriving over the long term. He or she must follow up the related opportunities and address associated problems and must be totally committed to doing so.

By contrast, those who are assisting with an assignment can choose the depth of their commitment and can back away from the project at any time. They are "renters" rather than owners, with less investment in the effort. In many cases, they don't perform as expected because their role is peripheral and not well defined. When a team member is simply helping, the ultimate responsibility is always yours.

Putting It to Work

What does ownership mean? Owners are the go-to person for questions about a particular service area, client, employee or engagement. Owners must be included in all discussions and decisions about their assigned area. They can be counted on to be thinking about, planning for, worrying over and driving progress for the area they own. They are ultimately accountable for its success.

In order to leverage the value of ownership, remember that an owner does not have to be a firm executive. Giving staff members and administrative staff appropriate ownership responsibilities develops their leadership skills and confidence and builds greater loyalty to the firm. In addition, the owner is not the person who does all the work involved with the assignment. Owners oversee decisions and have ultimate responsibility, but assigning

ownership should not be a way to offload unpleasant or difficult tasks. Owners also are not required or expected to make decisions entirely on their own or without input from any other firm members. They guide the decision-making process, but they need not handle it entirely alone. They are the facilitator and strategist, but they should be free to use a team approach to develop or implement their plans.

Ownership Procedures

Even in the smallest firms, it can be valuable to assign ownership to staff members based on the firm's needs and the employees' experience and training. How can you instill a commitment to it within your firm? The first step is to clearly define ownership for all key areas of your organization. The owner or partner team should first evaluate every department, business process, service line or other "division" of your firm (no matter what its size) and assign one single owner to every area. Single ownership is important, because when there is more than one owner, no one is really responsible for the outcome. No one person should own too many areas, however, since that will undermine the process.

As a starting point, there should be one owner for each of the following:

- Business functions.
- Service lines.
- The office.
- Clients.
- Engagements.
- Employees.

Each department, office or service line can break down into segments, too, with single owners for each of those segments. For instance, one person may be the owner of the firm's tax services, and she can segment her group into smaller divisions, such as the 1040 business, corporate tax services, tax software maintenance and electronic filing, tax related communications and tax season staffing. She can pick one owner for each of these specialized areas and those owners would then be responsible for driving their assigned areas forward.

Many Advantages

Most of us have built our organizations around a bunch of people who were hired to help, instead of a team of people who own their assigned initiatives and are driving them toward their intended outcomes. Instilling a sense of ownership can provide numerous benefits for firms. Finding and retaining qualified staff has topped the PCPS Top Issues in Practice Management since its inception. At the same time, the PCPS Top Talent Study asked firm's most promising non-partner employees about their priorities when it came to growth opportunities, job benefits and firm culture, and how those priorities affected their decisions to join or stay with a firm. Their top reason for taking a job with a firm was the career growth opportunities involved, and that was also their number two reason for staying with a firm. Creating a culture of ownership in your firm can not only help energize staff and improve productivity, it can also improve your retention of ambitious staff members by helping them to become more fully invested in the firm and its future.

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