More on Partner Roles and Responsibilities

As promised, this column is a continuation of my last column on partner roles and responsibilities. In this column, I am going to expand my discussion on the role of technical and client relationship partners.

I want to start by repeating a paragraph from my last column. It is:

“When you are a client relationship partner, regardless of your technical specialty, you take on the role of being that client’s general contractor for professional services. If you are unwilling to fulfill this role, then you shouldn’t be a client relationship manager, you should be a technical partner.”

My simple definitions of both are:

Client Relationship Partner: This is a person in the firm who is assigned the duty of understanding the needs and priorities of specific clients and helping them address those needs through:

1) providing advisory services to assist the client in putting together an action plan or approach to solve those problems,
2) providing additional firm services that can directly resolve the identified issues,
3) referral of other professionals that can provide the necessary assistance, or
4) simply being a concerned objective third party that listens and has an interest in them and their business.

Technical Partner: This is a person in the firm that is highly technically competent and their professional focus is on:

1) being the firm’s preeminent resource in specific technical areas,
2) providing advice and council to other partners (and staff) in those technical areas,
3) taking on the oversight and project management of the firm’s most complex technical work,
4) oversight of quality systems, processes and training to ensure technical standards are maintained regarding the firm’s work product.

Can a partner be both a technical partner and a client relationship partner? “Yes” As a matter of fact, with firms with less than 6 or 7 partners, that should describe every partner. As firms grow larger, they can begin to afford the overhead of maintaining technical-only partners. Unfortunately, the reality of most CPA firm partners is that they provide lip service to their role of client relationship partner and bury themselves in their role of technical partner.

So how do you know who is living up to their obligation of being a client relationship partner? Just walk up to any partner, identify one of their “A” clients, and ask him or her to list that clients strategic or tactical priorities for the next 18 months? I am not just referring to that client’s tax or audit priorities, but rather holistically as an organization or as a person, what are those priorities. If your partners can't answer this question off the top of their heads or after quickly referring to recent notes, then those partners are not fulfilling the duties of a client relationship partner.

How do you know if a partner is a technical-only partner? Technical-only partners tend to:

1) always default to the work on the floor (in the office) as being a higher priority than meeting with clients
2) focus primarily on cranking out work product,
3) only talk to their clients about the service they specialize in providing (for example, a tax partner might fully service a client's needs in the tax area, but ignore that same client's needs in other areas)
4) emphasize the development of their technical skills and have little regard for soft skills.

When small firms start allowing partners to become technical-only partners, they create a long term success and profitability problem. Why? Because technical partners are just managers with more experience. If the partners are so busy cranking out the work, then who is:

- taking the time to make sure their clients are satisfied and being adequately serviced? and/or
- finding new opportunities to help grow the firm, or at a minimum, replace the natural client attrition that will occur due to no fault of the firm (death, sale of the business, etc.)?

It is poor firm strategy to judge satisfaction and service solely based on whether clients call to complain or to ask you to forward their files to some other CPA firm. Technical partners tend to wait for the phone to ring before help is offered, and even then, usually only offer helps when the request for service falls into their specialty area. How can we look in the mirror and see ourselves as our clients "most trusted advisors" when the only time we advise them is when they call us, or the only questions we want to talk about are their tax returns or financial statements. Client relationship partners proactively seek out what is "keeping their clients awake at night." They care enough about their clients as a whole that staying in touch has a higher priority than personally doing their work.

Small firms rarely have the luxury of having technical-only partners. So that means that small firms have to focus on developing good technical managers (even with a solo practitioner, you should think hard about starting to develop someone into a manager level position over the next 5 years so that you are better positioned to well serve your clients). The managers should be groomed to take on the responsibility of managing the "C" level – and maybe some low "B" level clients. They should also be the project managers for much of the "A" and "B" clients' work. This is the type of organization firms need to build to free up the partners' time so they can do those things that only they can do.

In my next column, I will discuss what minimum partner rainmaking skills are, and most of you will be surprised by my answer.