

## Managing the Professional Services Firm

By David H. Maister

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Writing management books for business executives is a growth industry. Very few management books, however, are aimed at professionals. David Maister's book is an excellent contribution that provides thoughtful analysis and concrete suggestions for practitioners of a profession. These suggestions could be adapted by regulators for quality assurance purposes. This book should also help associations looking for resources to assist their members to practise more effectively.

Maister begins by urging practitioners to understand the type of practice they have. Most practitioners have one of three types of practices:

- (1) expertise practices in which elite practitioners diagnose and solve unique and complex problems for their clients;
- (2) experience practices in which difficult, but not unique, problems are solved by specialized practitioners; and
- (3) efficiency practices in which a high volume of predictable problems are solved by established systems and procedures at a low cost.

Recognizing one's type of practice is essential for practitioners in order to match their office structure, recruitment and practice style to the nature of their practice. Maister believes that it is difficult for a practice, let alone a single practitioner, to mix two types of practices effectively.

Perhaps the chapter with the broadest application is entitled "Quality Work Doesn't Mean Quality Service." Practitioners tend to become so fascinated with the challenges of their craft that

clients become a necessary nuisance. Maister counters that "people don't care how much you know until they know you care." Client satisfaction can be expressed by the following formula:

$$\text{Satisfaction} = \text{Perception} - \text{Expectation}$$

While neither a client's perception nor a client's expectation may reflect reality, both can be managed. For example, overestimating rather than underestimating the time it will take to deliver on a commitment can create satisfaction. Client expectations can be brought closer to reality by thorough explanation. Effective application of this formula can eliminate most complaints by clients to the practitioner's regulator and will prevent most malpractice lawsuits.

Maister encourages all practitioners to understand what it feels like to be a client. He makes an analogy to what it feels like for most of us to take our car to be repaired by a mechanic.

Intelligent questions by the mechanic as to the history and nature of the problem, a clean garage, being treated with respect and friendliness, a detailed and comprehensible bill, and follow-up advice all instill confidence in us. None of those features are direct indications, however, that the mechanic is competent. Similarly, when meeting prospective clients, thorough preparation and demonstrating knowledge by giving new information to the potential client is more effective than telling the client how much the practitioner knows.

*"Practitioners tend to become so fascinated with the challenges of their craft that clients become a necessary nuisance."*

Maister advises practitioners that their most important asset is their knowledge and skill. Unless practitioners are constantly learning new things, their ability to attract business and their career satisfaction will decline. Some practitioners, he says, have five years of experience and some have one year of experience five times. He suggests practitioners develop a personal continuing quality improvement program for themselves.

Recruitment and motivation of employees also takes up a significant portion of the book. Maister says it is a mistake to downplay the expectations of the new position because the recruit is then disappointed with the reality of job requirements. If anything, the challenges of the position should be overstated so that only highly motivated recruits will accept the position. For existing employees, it is important that they understand the meaning of what they are doing. Explaining the reason for why the work is important to the client and the practice and the importance of the task is effective.

Perhaps the book's greatest weakness is that it tries to do too much. Some portions are applicable only to large practices. Other portions are of interest only to practitioners who practise in an office setting. Financial return may also be overemphasized to some readers. However, most practitioners, regulators and voluntary associations will find some insights or suggestions of practical significance to them.

