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How to Create a Collaborative Law Firm Culture

Today's law firm strategies include a strong focus on retaining good talent. This is important to focus on because clients will tell us, if asked, that they consider a law firm's team to be part of their own internal team. So, retaining valuable talent, as many readers likely know, means staying connected to the clients. Retaining talent, especially at the mid and junior levels of the firm, can be as complicated and as simple as creating a collaborative culture. Much is being written about how collaborative cultures will facilitate improved client service and higher profits. But little is being written about how to achieve a culture of collaboration. Below are some steps to implement a collaborative culture:

1. Put the same effort into interviewing firm members and employees as the effort that is put into interviewing clients. Aligning the goals of the firm with lawyer and staff expectations is critical to keeping productive talent. It's every bit as important to know about their expectations and build their input, feedback and ideas into the firm's strategic thinking and planning. This useful habit also demonstrates that everyone matters.

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Prior to co-founding LawVision Group, Silvia chaired the Client Development Practice at Hildebrandt. She is a recognized leader in law firm business development strategy and is a frequent speaker at legal industry conferences, and law firm retreats. Silvia has spent 20 years as a consultant to the industry and has served as chief marketing and business development officer at two Global 50 firms. She is an adjunct faculty member of the Law Firm Management Master's Degree Program at the George Washington University College of Professional Studies.

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2. Be inclusive about decisions that impact others. Regardless of what decisions are being considered and discussed, it's always wise to involve other voices and in most, but not all cases, the voices of the group (whether it's an operations team, legal professionals, or administrative team) of people who will be impacted by the decision. This is where the greatest gap exists in law firms — between those who make decisions and those who are impacted by them.
3. Over-communicate. For important matters like visiting offices to discuss the firm's strategy, important firm updates and more, be sure to include business and support team professionals. They "touch" the clients in many ways and are an important asset. Involve them in important communications and they will appreciate and also understand the game plan and their role in its execution.
4. For client teams, include the voice of the client. Rather than hear a partner rattle on about what he/she knows about the client, ask the clients to be part of the team and invite them to one meeting a year. Hearing what the clients' goals are from their perspective and their voice aligns the team, the firm and the client. It's powerful.
5. Recognize client successes. When the client has a success, recognize it. Many clients share with us that they never hear from their firms about important client events and, in fact, some will be proactive in raising this topic as a means of how a firm can add value. Whether it's an acquisition, a new C-level hire or a recognition of some sort, show that the firm and its members are paying attention to the client. It ups the game score and helps to strengthen the relationships.
6. 6. Recognize firm team successes. Maybe the corporate model of a five-year gold pin or "employee of the month" seems unimportant. The unspoken message is "YOU MATTER!" to both employees and legal professionals. Try it and see. That's all I'm writing about that. Simply, it works.
7. Connect with clients' goals. Visit their websites and learn about recent happenings with the client organization. For public companies, visit their Investor Relations page and see what they are discussing with investors. The information gleaned from these sources will allow firm members to create new opportunities to add value and help clients to meet their goals. Sometimes these efforts will require "out of-the-box" thinking.
8. Model other collaborative cultures. Take best practices and incorporate them into the firm. Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, has stated: "Our only sustainable competitive advantage is the quality of our workforce. We're building a national retail company by creating pride in — and a stake in — the outcome of our labor. Starbucks' employees are expected to know the product line and behave as owners. Full-time and part-time employees (including leadership) receive training, career counseling, stock options, and health care benefits. The result:

phenomenal growth and employee retention.” To that I add, and clearly a market leader in pricing and profitability.

9. Empower people to make decisions. When people are empowered to make a decision on behalf of the firm, the team or with the client, everyone will be better served. When people are not empowered or controlled by their environment, they will exhibit aggressive defensive behaviors and clients and others may be the recipients of their attitudes. Alternatively, happy firm members will exhibit positive attitudes and better serve one another and clients.
10. Last, introduce everyone on the team — lawyers, staff and business professionals to the clients and vice versa so the clients know who the firm team is and the firm team is more invested in retaining the relationship. A law firm client recently told me she sent holiday cards to the in-house paralegal team who were part of the in-house counsel’s team. After that, she said the individuals went out of their way to support her and the firm, and to provide the in-house resources necessary to make the relationship even stronger. Everyone counts and everyone has a role.

Conclusion

By creating collaborative cultures, firms will see the energy level of their team increase, people will enjoy their work and clients will benefit from improved service levels. Ultimately, the brass ring — profits — will go up. So while some firms will view the competitive environment as one that inhibits the firm, others will embrace change, lead the firm to a collaborative culture, and enjoy new firm stability and loyal clients.