

Culture Shift: A Whole Firm Approach for Growing Revenue



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Every business has two major management responsibilities – minimizing expenses and maximizing revenue. Firms can cut costs, but that’s the easy part. The greater challenge is mobilizing their lawyers to change their behavior in ways that will maximize personal and firm business development potential. Facilitating this culture shift requires a level of institutional effort, coordination and follow-through

rarely found inside today’s law firms.

Anyone who has tried to change a culture knows it’s a monumental task. Impassioned speeches by firm leaders about increased cross-selling, better client service, more profitable clients and higher originations are never enough. True culture change requires a new breed of leaders who can encourage collaborative planning, change behaviors, revise systems, enhance skills, increase teamwork, implement supportive technology, align incentives, inspire colleagues – plus relentlessly drive implementation to get the right people moving in the right directions.

Getting Started – Collaborative Planning

If you’ve ever tried to jump-start business development in a firm, you’ve probably run up against a long laundry list of roadblocks – low motivation, siloed practices, dysfunctional groups, lack of trust, inefficient teams, ineffective leaders, poor communication, misaligned compensation, weak selling skills, unclear goals and measures, inconsistent client service, minimal accountability, and inadequate follow-through.

Along with these, no matter what firm cultural elements you want to shift, buy-in is required from those whose behavior you want to change. As you well know, you can’t just tell most lawyers what to do and expect they will automatically do it. They need facts. They have to analyze, dissect, and explore other approaches. Then – maybe – they’ll put their support behind a plan.

So from the get-go, engage your lawyers in a facilitated collaborative planning process and make them feel adequately involved in the decision-making process. Not only will you achieve the planning outcomes you desire, you’ll also set the stage for better implementation of your plan.

The Need for the “Watcher”

Simply developing a plan is not enough. The most important and often most underrated part of any real change initiative is a defined process for driving ongoing implementation. For that, you need key stakeholders to understand their roles, develop clear action plans, and adhere to specific deadlines.



There’s another secret ingredient, too: Stakeholders must agree to be managed to their plans. This requires a “Watcher” – a person or group with real power to remind, cajole, prod, and hold people accountable for their commitments. Without this level of management, most plans are destined to fail. Therefore, your collaborative planning process should conclude with a frank discussion of the roles and responsibilities of all players – the leaders and the led. It should lay out policies and procedures and give permission to leaders to do what it takes to make the plan happen.

Become a Business Development Machine

The culture change process is a delicate dance that requires many different initiatives blending at the right time, and in the right way, in order to move people to a higher level of performance. While details of how and when differ for every firm, the following are key elements any firm should consider if they want to become a more effective client development machine:

Senior Leadership Alignment

- Develop consensus on vision and goals
- Determine strategies, tactics, and priorities
- Determine major roles and responsibilities
- Agree on key measures
- Adjust compensation to encourage desired behaviors
- Develop tracking and reporting systems

Client Surveys and Feedback

- Prioritize clients
- Agree on a process and frequency of feedback
- Develop a formal process for acting on feedback received

Client and Industry Teams

- Identify high priority targets
- Develop team dynamics, standards, roles and enforcement
- Obtain client feedback
- Deliver exceptional levels of service
- Engage in structured cross-selling
- Increase market visibility
- Develop tracking and reporting systems

Exceptional Client Service

- Develop internal standards and specific best practices
- Provide ongoing training and refreshers
- Create a staff service committee
- Provide rewards and consequences that support desired behaviors

Cross-Selling

- Identify and overcome the common obstacles to cross-selling
- Build key internal relationships
- Align compensation system to encourage desired behaviors
- Focus on highest potential clients
- Train group leaders how to drive the process

Lateral Integration

- Develop a strategic acquisition plan
- Build a formal internal integration process
- Have laterals create a detailed client development plan
- Improve lateral selling skills
- Appoint lateral mentors who guide and provide accountability

Business Development Planning, Training and Coaching

- Identify and give support to high potential lawyers
- Provide best practices, specific tactics, and customized support
- Obtain personal commitments
- Develop a business development committee of associates to build for the future

Sales Management Skills for Group Leaders

- Encourage a culture of business development
- Provide appropriate power/authority
- Allow input on compensation
- Conduct group planning
- Develop buy-in and motivation in group members
- Drive cross-selling
- Develop the right goals and measures of progress and success
- Track and report on progress
- Provide ongoing training and reminders
- Work with other complementary practice groups to drive cross-selling

Change is Hard – But So Rewarding

Culture change is extremely hard work and requires an unprecedented firm-wide effort. The managing partner must become the Chief Sales Officer/Cheerleader/Watcher/Carrot and Sticker. Group Leaders must have the stamina and skills to drive focused action in their groups. Each lawyer needs to adopt new behaviors. This is on top of the legal industry's long-embedded tradition of resisting sales and marketing.

Most firms are not ready for this kind of commitment, but those that do make the leap will become client-focused juggernauts, and prototypes for the successful law firms of the future.

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