

# **Harnessing the Power of the Pandemic**

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The ongoing specter of COVID sets the stage for very uncertain times. It triggers thoughts and feelings that set amygdalas on high alert, hijacking our ability to think rationally and see forests through trees.

But, what if ...

What if we viewed our current situation through a different lens to see what others are not seeing?

What if we could transmute the negative energy of the pandemic into a positive force?

What if we could harness this powerful force to transform our firms from what they were, into what we want them to become?

As many of you know, in the Chinese language the word "crisis" is composed of two characters; one representing "danger" and the other "opportunity". It is very easy to see the danger, however, what is hidden under the surface are the opportunities. Opportunities to initiate changes that can have a long-term positive impact.

## **The Power to Bend Reality**

Law firms, especially the larger ones, are not known to be the most flexible of institutions. As an industry, we generally have a "devil-we-know" mindset. The Managing Partner of an Am Law 200 firm expressed this well when he said even though he knows things need to change, there is so much institutional inertia, it's just not worth the fight.

But what if a surprise gift showed up, in a form we never would have expected or asked for, such as this pandemic? What if this hugely disruptive outside force possessed within it the ability to imbue you and your leadership team with new powers? Superpowers that, if properly applied, can be used to overcome previously insurmountable institutional inertia?

Now you may ask, what are some of the manifestations of COVID's disruption? Before this, who would have thought that within a matter of weeks, almost every law firm would have all their lawyers and staff working from home? Who would have thought that lawyers would regularly be using remote technology like Zoom to do business or to conduct trials, mediations and depositions?

This pandemic has gifted us the power to melt resistance and implement rapid institutional change that is unparalleled in recent history. As an aware leader, you can use this to your advantage.

Before the pandemic, creating change in a law firm was like trying to bend a steel rod with your bare hands. But this red-hot crisis has softened the rigidity, allowing a fleeting window where proactive leaders can step up to mold a new reality. I'm sure many of you know the term neuroplasticity, which is the brain's ability to adjust neural activity in response to a new situation or change in the environment. With your permission, I'd like to introduce a new concept - "bureauplasticity", which is the ability of a typically rigid law firm bureaucracy to flex its way of operating, based on new situations or changes in their environment.

Since a crisis is a terrible thing to waste, the big question of the day is, what are you doing with this short-lived bureauplastic moment? Are you running around putting out little fires, or are you lighting flames under creating better models of running your firm? Are you playing small and defensive, or are you using this moment to go bigger, to operate better, to move your pieces around in new ways that can position you to tap into more of your potential?

There has never been a better time to get on the field and tackle your nagging cultural issues. The moment is now, and I'm reminded of a quote from champion tennis player Venus Williams, who said "Take the opportunities, because when you don't, they're gone." Another way of saying this has been well-stated by Lin Manuel Miranda's character of Hamilton, who says - "I am NOT throwing away my shot".

## **Let's Get Tactical**

Now that we've addressed the what and the why, let's discuss the how. How do you use this shot, this moment, this opportunity, to move your firm toward a better version of itself?

We know that as an individual you can't make it happen on your own, so you must activate your allies, those people in your firm who can amplify your vision and use their influence to impact others. These allies can serve as dominos to start a cascade of activities that can move a firm toward its desired future. Your most powerful, domino-wielding allies are your firm's leaders. They are the few who can have an outsized impact on the many.

Paraphrasing Reggie Jackson, a Hall of Fame baseball player, “they are the straws that stir the drink”.

If properly activated and armed with the right tools, these allies can become what I call CultureShifters, those strategically placed influencers who have the potential and power to shift a firm’s culture. Effective CultureShifters:

- Can be evangelists for better ways to think and act.
- Can eliminate obstacles that get in the way of higher performance.
- Can turn their groups’ lawyers into better rainmakers.
- Can create deeper connections between groups and offices to unleash more cross-selling.
- Can themselves come together as leaders to operate as a real team to learn from each other, to coach each other, to collaborate with each other and to hold each other accountable to raise all boats.

This is a lofty aspiration, so how do we get them on board to transform into the fire-starting, firm-changing catalysts we need to take advantage of this transient moment in history? We know merely telling people what to do is not enough. To get them inspired to own the process, they must themselves work through the issues and come to their own conclusions. This can be accomplished through the deft use of facilitation, where they roll up their sleeves and determine how the firm should adapt to these times.

With a well-crafted facilitation process, you can guide them toward engaging in the right conversations, making the right decisions and doing the right things. The facilitation can be conducted virtually over remote technology platforms, where they can learn, share, collaborate, give and receive peer coaching, plan and hold each other accountable for acting on their commitments.

As an example, I used this approach several months ago when I conducted a virtual training and planning session for group leaders in an Am Law 200 firm. We focused on two topics - the issues and obstacles of being revenue-focused leaders and determining what must be done to activate more cross-selling. The first fifteen minutes were devoted to a brief training, and then they were divided into virtual breakout rooms to discuss their issues and opportunities and receive peer coaching from each other. When they reconvened in the full virtual room, they reported on dozens of practical steps they agreed to take to overcome their issues

and jump on their opportunities. They also committed to various ways to cross-connect with each other to encourage more cross-selling.

## **Activating More Cross-Selling**

On the topic of cross-selling, having consulted with 200 law firms, it's clear to me that increasing share-of-wallet from existing clients is one of the best strategies for growing revenue. If firms only knew how to reconfigure themselves to become more of a cross-selling, cross-collaborating machine, they could likely attract tens of millions of dollars in new revenue (FYI, for you definitionalists, for the sake of this discussion I will use the term cross-selling to also include cross-collaboration).

As you have likely experienced, firm-wide cross-selling is often a tough nut to crack because of entrenched lawyer habits, beliefs and non-aligned systems. Given the millions of dollars you are likely leaving on the table every year, now is a good time to focus the organization-shifting power of the pandemic on cross-selling to correct any flaws in your systems.

In my most recent book, I identified 13 Key Accelerators of cross-selling, and one of the biggest impediments to acceleration is a compensation system that does not reward desired cross-behaviors. As much as we implore our lawyers to cross-sell, if the reward system is not properly aligned, it can throw significant grit in the gears of your cross-selling machine.

In normal times, adjusting the comp system is usually a hands-off topic, but the power of the pandemic allows us to operate with different rules. If your comp system does not support your strategic goals, now may be a great time to fix it. As a side note, many firms do possess compensation plans that support cross-selling, but many of the lawyers don't know it or believe it. I call this "compensation perception disorder", which can often be cured with a well-crafted internal PR campaign.

Another Accelerator of cross-selling is to activate 'Gives'. In the book *Give and Take*, author Adam Grant talks about people who are givers versus those who are the more selfish takers. He points out that when a cultural norm of giving exists, even the takers are motivated to give because they don't want to be perceived as bad corporate citizens. That means as leaders you should initiate systems that encourage your lawyers to give cross-opportunities to others, which in turn can activate a cascade of continued giving throughout the firm.

Yet another of the 13 Accelerators is related to measuring the right things. Typically, we look at end-of-the-day metrics like revenue and hours, and while of course they are important, we must look deeper to measure those activities that get us there. Therefore, I suggest focusing on progress measures in three key areas: 1) The number of internal conversations that occur between your lawyers where they identify and make plans relating to cross-selling opportunities; 2) the number of external conversations that occur with clients to make cross-introductions to new firm lawyers; and 3) the number of times the new lawyer stays top-of-mind to remind those clients of their services.

## **Virtual Business Development Tactics for Your Lawyers**

Now that their go-to, in-person techniques for conducting business development have been taken away, many firms report that their lawyers are hamstrung and desperately need new approaches to maintain connections and grow new relationships. The following are a few tactics that have worked well in this new remote environment:

- First - Get better on Zoom! There are the basics like camera angles, lighting, backgrounds and general Zoom etiquette, and then there are more sophisticated approaches for things like pitches and presentations, or for litigators in mediations, depositions and trials, where additional technology can be layered in to give them a more professional, network news-like persona. Our online presence makes a major statement - with some thought and planning, their virtual impression can be a powerful one.
- Have your lawyers take stock of their personal networks and go deep to find people who can lead to more work. Inside the firm, they should identify lawyers in their own group, other groups, other offices and new laterals. Externally, they can search for more decision-makers inside client organizations, and they can also connect with former clients, prospective clients (both those they know and those they'd like to know), referral sources, alumni (from the firm and from their schools), opponents, media sources, organizations, boards and people who share their passions and hobbies. I regularly find that when lawyers engage in this exercise, they are pleasantly surprised to find they have a much larger network than they originally thought.
- COVID Checklist - Most firms have created their versions of a COVID task force and supportive resources. By turning those materials into a

checklist, you give your lawyers a tool for engaging in conversations with clients and prospects to explore a full range of issues, which could result in new areas in which to serve them.

- Offer to join clients for their own internal strategic planning sessions (virtually). During a crisis, leadership teams meet more frequently and have more questions. If your lawyers offer to be in the virtual room with them, they can deepen relationships, meet other decision-makers and potentially get more work. One Managing Partner I spoke with recently reported she got five new pieces of work from one client using this technique.
- Provide virtual training programs for clients, and where appropriate, invite them to virtually attend programs you put on internally for your own lawyers. This is a great way to get more contacts in a client organization to connect with more lawyers in your firm.
- Offer virtual office hours where your lawyers make themselves available to a client or organization for a set time to answer questions.
- Joining or starting virtual groups is one of my favorite techniques. While most conferences have been cancelled, there is still a strong need to learn and to network. If virtual programs are occurring, have your lawyers attend them, and better yet, have them create their own where there is a need that is not being filled. It gives your lawyers the opportunity to reach out to invite anyone they want (already known or not), and those people can invite others who would add value to the group.
- There is a much higher level of writing and virtual presenting occurring now, so this is an opportunity to invite clients, prospects and referral sources to co-author and/or co-present. This is yet another way to deepen existing relationships and to reach out to new people.

## **More Approaches**

If you want to extend the use of your pandemic-induced, shape-shifting powers, there are a few other areas that can often benefit from some level of organizational transformation:



- Client service is where the rubber meets the road. Great service can get your firm hired, and poor service can get you fired. To stand out, we're not talking about "keep-up-with-the-Jones" levels of service, but rather delivering truly differentiating experiences. That won't happen by just leaving it in the hands of your lawyers to do whatever they personally believe is enough. Interestingly, I often find lawyers have a distorted view of themselves when it comes to client service. Based on survey data I've collected from over 2,200 respondents, the top score, a 4.15 out of 5, is from the statement "Our group delivers exceptional client service." However, the survey also contains four other client service statements that represent underlying factors that go into delivering exceptional service, and those scores range from 3.04 to 3.34 out of 5. This gap between perception and reality can be remedied with a comprehensive and sustained client service planning, training and implementation initiative.
- Another area that can deliver significant returns is enhancing the lateral integration process, one that truly addresses the real needs of laterals and gives them every opportunity to thrive. While some firms are already good at this, many others leave a lot of room for improvement, and an upgrade here could yield significant cultural and financial benefits.
- The last area I will explore here is conducting revenue-focused retreats with practice groups, departments and teams. If you can guide them to plan and be accountable for engaging in the right behaviors, they will support your other efforts and accelerate your path to new revenue. These sessions can be run virtually, with all of the advantages that go with virtual programming (save time and travel costs, and programming can be delivered over time, resulting in better retention and implementation). In fact, when done right, virtual meetings can outperform their live counterparts.

## **Activating Your Great Accelerator**

As leaders, it is your job to see things others don't see, and to do things others won't do. It is your duty to be awake to opportunities, to see through the dark clouds and to find, and act upon, the silver linings. Rather than fixating only on defensive moves, you can reframe this moment in history as a Great Accelerator toward your desired future.



Which leads to one last consideration: When this ends, when things settle into the new normal, how do you want your firm to look? How do you want to be remembered as a leader? Did you take your shot? As they say in Hamilton, "History has its eyes on you."



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David is a multiple award-winning consultant and two-time best-selling author who has trained and coached thousands of lawyers and leaders in 200 law firms worldwide, including nearly half of the AmLaw 200. He was inducted into the *National Law Journal* Hall of Fame for being voted the #1 business development consultant and coach for three consecutive years, and he has written and contributed to 13 books on law firm business development and leadership.

David also has significant expertise designing and running remote training sessions and virtual retreats and has found that well-crafted initiatives can be more focused, more engaging, and can launch more people into action than typical live events.

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