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# How Law Firms Can Create Positive Workplace Culture

Here's why a more positive, productive workplace environment can reduce turnover and even increase revenue at law firms.

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When [law firm](#) leaders make changes to create a more positive, productive culture, those upgrades can improve employee sentiment and the company's bottom line.

Company culture is an issue every firm leader should be addressing as law firms are known to be unforgiving environments, and many attorneys buckle under the strain.

The good news is that firms that have taken steps to improve the [workplace culture](#) have learned lessons that can benefit the larger legal community.

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## The Catalysts for Cultural Change

There's usually a reason why a law firm decides this is the time for change in workplace culture. That inflection point will guide the process in enacting change.

For example, Clark Hill, one of the nation's 200 largest firms, acquired several smaller firms around the country. Following that, its leaders decided that establishing a common culture between its offices and practices was essential, says Roy Sexton, director of marketing for Clark Hill and current international president of the Legal Marketing Association.

For McGuire, Wood & Bissette, an Asheville, North Carolina, midsize law firm, an impetus for change came when its partners decided the firm should be a permanent fixture that would "go on forever," rather than close once its partners retired, says Tom Grella, a partner at the firm.

With that decision, planning for the future became a conversation about culture. They discussed how to meet everyone's needs – what would make junior attorneys and staff want to join a firm and remain there for their entire careers.

## Start at the Top by Working on Leadership Skills

Researchers suggest that the majority of change efforts fail. This high failure rate is often because leaders don't start by assessing themselves. By building on their strengths and shoring up their weaknesses, they will begin to create a culture of strong leaders who are self-aware, humble and communicative, says Michele DeStefano, University of Miami School of Law professor of law and author of the forthcoming book "Leader Upheaval: A Guide to Client-Centricity, Culture-Creation, and Collaboration."



"The more realistic and more humble leaders are about their abilities, the better," DeStefano says.

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## Assess the Current Culture

Firm leaders should begin assessing the current culture. Conduct focus groups, run surveys and have extensive interviews with [attorneys](#) and staff. Ask them what values resonate. Determine why people work at the firm and where they want improvement. Inventory everything, good and bad, Sexton explains.

Next, have hard conversations asking, "Is this who we are? Is this what we want?" Look for the nuggets of gold to build upon, he says.

Additionally, leaders need to be aware that the best innovations may come from the junior lawyers and staff. Following them isn't a sign of weakness. That's leadership, DeStefano says.

## Cultural Changes Mean Taking Risks

To achieve a culture change, "You have to take big swings," Sexton says.

Therefore, once leaders have assessed the current culture, they should have a small group develop an action plan, avoiding committees that turn ideas into bland consensus.

Once established, attorneys and staff should see themselves in the new culture. If they do that, they will become ambassadors of it, he says.

## Compensate Attorneys' True Contributions to the Firm

A decade ago, McGuire, Wood & Bissette had a strict compensation model based solely on attorneys' billable hours and the fees they'd originated, delegated and collected.

[Compensation](#) was formulaic and had little to do with firm values, Grella says. While this is a common practice, it led to attorneys competing against each other and other negative conduct.



The firm changed to a subjective compensation model that evaluates other ways attorneys contribute to the firm besides revenue. For example, attorneys get credit for mentoring junior attorneys and community involvement.

Changing the compensation changed the attorneys, says Grella, who has chaired the American Bar Association's law practice management section and frequently writes on leaders' role in culture.

"People work as a team for the organization's success, and everybody's making more money. But it's not the goal," he says. "It's a consequence of the organization because people are working for the organization to succeed."

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## Become More Collaborative

Firms may have more success by focusing on how they work together, rather than how much they work separately.

McGuire's compensation shift led to increased lawyer collaboration, which led to better service for clients. And that led to others joining in because they wanted to be part of that success, Grella says.

"You can tell when firms have a truly collaborative and congenial culture," DeStefano says. In those firms, attorneys work with colleagues because they want to, instead of being obligated to.

## Adopt a Brand That Is Emblematic of the Culture

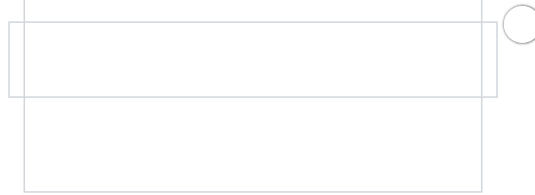
Culture isn't a brand, but marketing that culture is vital, particularly to reach a firm's younger, digital natives, DeStefano says.

Once the firm adopts its framework, develop a brand and messaging espousing these values. Distribute videos, brochures, even water bottles and T-shirts, to promote the approach, Sexton says.

McGuire describes its culture as "excellence in the practice of law" and uses that to guide everything it does.

## Get Internal and External Buy-In

Cultural change develops over time in small pockets of a firm, so it's important to get the early adopters – especially the digital natives – to believe in it, DeStefano says.



Include external audiences in buy-in efforts as well, since clients want to know about a firm's values and how the attorneys approach their work, Sexton says.

During Clark Hill's effort, Sexton's team released videos interviewing people discussing their work. Through internal promotions and social media, more than 700,000 viewers watched them.

## Maintain the Focus

"The launch is just the beginning, and the least interesting thing," Sexton says.

Leaders should conduct quarterly town halls. Human resources and marketing teams should release weekly newsletters and additional materials. And if a plan resonates with the firm and its clients, stick with it.

Sexton is amazed when firms change strategies based on feedback received from lawyers at competing firms.

"Don't let the committee kill a great idea, and don't be more concerned about gaining the approval of your competition than leaving them in the dust," Sexton says.

## Accountability Is Essential

Accountability is critical, and firm leaders should be the managers of the culture. They can't delegate that to others, DeStefano says.

It's often only one or two people who make the culture awful, and problem employees – even senior attorneys – need to be cabined off and told their behavior needs to change, she explains.

"Firm culture is not what you label. It's what is tolerated and what is enforced," Grella says. "Your culture is what you do and not what you say – unless they're the same."

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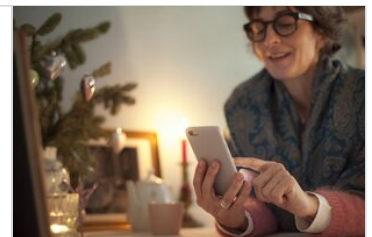
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