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The Impact of Great Law Firm Culture

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Your lawyers are your law firm's greatest asset. They bring in the money, build your firm's brand, and make a difference in your clients' lives. The expectations are big — but sometimes the burnout is even bigger. With long hours, lack of work-life balance, and significant expectations placed upon them, it's understandable that many lawyers struggle to make law firm life work.

This is where a law firm's culture can make all the difference. Support and understanding will go a long way in keeping your firm's lawyers not only content but also professionally satisfied.

In this article, we'll discuss what makes for a great law firm culture. We'll also discuss its overarching impact on lawyers' happiness and thus your firm's success and bottom line.

What are tips to cultivate a better law firm culture and environment?

Your law firm's culture is representative of its core values. Hopefully, those core values include respect, collegiality, and equity. Creating a law firm culture and environment that supports lawyers (and staff!) and treats each employee like a human being is central to cultivating a productive and supportive work environment.

All of this is good for your people, good for your firm, and good for your bottom line. So, consider these tips that will help you build a better culture at your law firm.

Value your team

Money talks, but so do benefits and paid time off. The best way to ensure the satisfaction of your lawyers and staff is to offer salaries and benefits packages that are competitive in the market.

We understand that this is easier said than done — you're the one balancing your budget at the end of the year, not us. But one of the best ways to spend your firm's revenue is by paying your team and staff competitively, thus showing them their value to the firm. A higher salary means higher retention rates and thus less training of new associates and turnover of client contacts (we'll get into this more below).

Valuing your team also includes promoting internal pay equity. The gender pay gap is no secret, and it's larger for women of color. Your law firm can both promote equity and look out for its bottom line by offering all employees fair and competitive packages regardless of their gender or

racial identity. By paying your staff thoughtfully and re-evaluating their compensation regularly, your firm will show concretely (read: in cold hard cash) that it values its workforce.

Support your team

Creating a healthy firm culture requires healthy employees. There are several thoughtful ways to support your employees and thus create a great firm culture.

Monitor hours

One of the biggest issues for lawyers is burnout. One way to combat it is to monitor the hours of your individual attorneys and apportion workload accordingly. This means that if you notice one associate has been billing 12 hours a day for a week straight, it likely means that she needs support, and you may need to reallocate her workload.

Overwork isn't good for anyone: the quality of the legal work suffers, and your lawyers are more likely to become frustrated and disengaged.

Recognize good work

Though secondary to a better work-life balance, recognition goes a long way. If one associate is key to a big settlement, give them a shoutout at the next team meeting or in the firm newsletter. If a partner recently won a big pro bono case, it's appropriate to do the same. Letting your lawyers know that you notice their hard work is important to employee satisfaction.

Offer flexibility

The pandemic taught us many things about office life, including that it's not for everyone and that many people can be just as productive (maybe even more productive) working from home. By offering flexible work arrangements, including work-from-home options, your firm can easily support its lawyers and staff.

Help employees grow

Constructive feedback and encouragement are all important components of professional growth for lawyers. This proves especially true for junior lawyers and new staff members. By providing individualized feedback and having one-on-one meetings (not just waiting for end-of-year performance reviews), your lawyers will feel supported in their learning.

To encourage development, find out what your lawyers and staff members are most interested in learning about. This gives junior lawyers and other employees the ability to both shape their careers and get excited about their practice. In turn, this will motivate them to deliver better work.

What can make a culture be considered good or bad?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said it best: I know it when I see it. You know when your law firm's culture is healthy, supportive, and working. You can also sense when things are tense and some readjusting is needed.

Much of what makes a law firm culture good or bad comes down to one thing: respect. Do your lawyers feel respected by the firm? Do staff feel respected by the lawyers? Does everyone feel like

their time and efforts are being respected? These are all important questions to ask as you both begin to create and reimagine your law firm's culture.

Open communication is key here. A good law firm culture prioritizes communication. Lawyers and staff alike should feel empowered to communicate with firm management on all topics, including serious subjects like pay, discrimination, workloads, and wellness. It also means that you should also open the door for more business-oriented discussions, enabling your team to share innovative ideas for client development or interesting CLEs and conferences.

Make sure that your law firm also follows through. Open communication without results is just talking. So, if you know that an employee is struggling, help them. If an associate has a great idea, listen and then help them achieve it. Your law firm will be a better and more productive place if you can do these things.

How can great law firm culture lead to growth?

A great law firm culture can help grow your firm in two very important ways: lawyer, staff, and client retention and recruitment.

By having a strong and supportive law firm culture, you'll retain more lawyers and staff. Turnover is not good for your law firm in any respect. It requires outputting significant onboarding and training efforts, all of which are nonbillable and expensive. Additionally, the integration of lateral associates can be difficult for all parties. Fewer lawyers in a practice group often means that too much work is shared by too few lawyers, thus leading to burnout and possible resignation. It becomes a cyclical problem.

The best way to address retention issues is to not have them by supporting your lawyers and staff in all the ways addressed in this article. Retained lawyers mean greater team synergy and harmony, higher productivity, and a friendlier workplace.

Retaining your clients is just as important. No one (and we mean it, no one) wants to be fired by a client. Your firm's culture is central to being client-centric. It should go without saying, but treating clients with respect and dignity is essential. If your law firm is staffed with positive, responsive, and productive lawyers, you'll make your firm more attractive and competitive to the clients that pay the bills. This holds true for all firms: big, medium, small, or solo.

Your law firm's culture (and reputation) is particularly important when it comes to recruitment. People talk, and culture plays a big role in getting top recruits. Think about it: would a top recruit with numerous options go to a law firm known for burning out its lawyers or not caring about its culture? Our guess is no.

Your law firm's brand is indicative of its culture. Having one focused on positivity, collaboration, and collegiality is imperative for both short- and long-term growth.

What about the impact of diversity and inclusion on law firm culture?

The legal profession has never been representative of the general makeup of the U.S. population. This is changing, and your law firm can and should be part of that change. However, your law firm should not only be committed to hiring diverse attorneys and staff but also to retaining them. A

positive and inclusive law firm culture is the best way to do so.

Diversity is important to your firm's growth. Different perspectives make for more innovative thinking and a more fulsome representation of clients. With different and varied voices at the table, you'll be able to consider issues from all angles and come up with creative solutions not possible otherwise.

In short, a diverse and inclusive legal team is an asset to your law firm and a boon to clients. Inclusion and representation are important factors in an equitable firm culture and are good for the longevity of your law firm.

Create your best law firm culture

Your lawyers and staff want to work at a law firm that offers competitive pay, meaningful collaboration, and authentic collegiality. Support and a commitment to diversity and inclusiveness should also be included to boot.

All of this is achievable; you just need a good plan and open lines of communication. Both your staff and bottom line will thank you.

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