

CultureShift: A Whole Firm Approach for Generating Greater Client Loyalty and Growing Revenue

by David H. Freeman, J.D.

If you were to eavesdrop on an Executive Committee meeting in a typical law firm, you very well could hear some version of the following conversation: *“We have excellent lawyers, but the market for our services is not what it used to be. We’ve cut all we can from our overhead. How can we get our lawyers focused on developing more business?”*

One of the greatest challenges facing firm leaders is guiding lawyers to change their behaviors in ways that will maximize personal and firm-wide business development potential. Facilitating such a culture shift requires a level of institutional effort, coordination and relentless follow-through rarely found inside today’s firms.

Anyone who has tried to change a culture knows it is a monumental task. Impassioned speeches by firm leaders about increasing cross-selling, delivering better client service, finding more profitable clients and generating 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 and tirelessly 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 within a firm, you've probably run up against a 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.

Underlying many of these challenges is the need for buy-in and agreement. As you have painfully experienced, you can’t tell most lawyers what to do and expect they will automatically do it. They need facts. They must analyze, dissect, challenge and explore other approaches. Ideas must be their ideas, and they must act in sync with others to achieve the potential synergy that exists within your firm.

One way to generate buy-in and consensus is by putting your lawyers through a facilitated, collaborative planning process. They will work together to analyze their problems and develop joint solutions. They will develop a greater sense of ownership around achieving the outcomes they agreed were important. By using this approach, not only will you focus their attention and energy, but you will also set the stage for better implementation down the road.

Major Drivers of Culture Change

Within the planning process, you must carefully choose and blend initiatives at the right time, in the right way, to encourage 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 create a more powerful, self-sustaining culture of client development:

Senior Leadership Alignment and Planning

- 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 system for consistently acting on the 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 the compensation system to encourage desired behaviors
- Focus on high potential clients
- Train group leaders how to drive the process

Lateral Integration

- Develop a strategic acquisition plan
- Build a structured integration process
- Require laterals to create personal client development plans
- Improve lateral selling skills
- Appoint lateral mentors who provide guidance and 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

It's All About Implementation

Simply developing a plan is never enough. The most important and often underrated part of any real change effort lies in creating a defined process for driving ongoing implementation. In a law firm setting, this requires the consent of the lawyers to be managed. They must understand their roles, develop clear action plans, adhere to specific deadlines and give their permission to be “watched”.

This role of the “Watcher” can be fulfilled by a single person or group, whose job it is to remind, cajole, prod and hold people accountable for their commitments. To gain this power, include in your collaborative planning process a frank discussion of the roles and responsibilities of all players – the leaders and the led. You should also agree upon policies and procedures that give your leaders the authority to do what is needed to get plans implemented.

Change is Hard – But the Future will be Harder

Culture change is extremely demanding work. You need the trifecta of leadership, planning and process, mixed with an unprecedented level of firm-wide commitment. The Managing Partner must become the Chief Sales, Watcher, Cheerleader and Carrot and Stick Officer. Group Leaders must have the stamina and skills to drive sustained action in their groups. And every lawyer must become more client-focused and team-oriented.

The truth is, many firms are not ready for this kind of commitment. Those that don't, however, risk falling behind the client-focused juggernauts who will blaze the trail as the successful law firms of the future.

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