

Administrative Leadership Legacy

Have you been giving it your ALL lately?

Given the daily barrage of articles, newsletters and periodicals there is little room to doubt the competitive marketplace all firms find themselves in today. Textbooks, consultants and other great prognosticators tell us that the essence of winning in a competitive marketplace is being in the right place before the right time. Much has been also written about the critical importance of teamwork to success in today's business environment.



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Depending upon your perspective, this sounds exceedingly simple or complex.

However, there is an additional element of challenge for law firms. In the "normal" size firms in normal populated centres, the actual practice of law is not a team sport!

But what is a team sport in these and all firms, is everything from the attorney's desk back.

The strength of these teams is very much dependent on the level of innovation being inspired by the administrative leaders of the firm. For purposes of this article, innovation is simply how the organization creates value for its clients - internal and external.

Law firms are incubators for stress, which, if left untreated, tends to act as sandpaper on the human spirit. Many administrative managers overtime journey down the following path:

- Clearly at the outset they are "early innovators";
- Then over time they evolve into the "early adapters";
- Later they become the "timely reactors"; and
- Lastly they become part of the "firm's culture" (where change is a four letter word).

Obviously in the parallel world of innovation, many firms experience a movement from "breakout innovation" - development effort that goes beyond new and improved into the realm of very different or self re-inventing - to "performance innovation". The latter involves efforts to improve already established services or processes by adding new features, improving quality, reducing deliver times or enhancing support services. The last stop on this innovation spiral is status quo of which no explanation is required.

Many solutions and strategies to this downward spiral have been tried in the past and certainly new ones are being developed on a regular basis. The following are two solutions that you should consider:

1. Corporate coaching for all your administrative managers AND administrative partners;
and
2. Pursuit of a career outside the firm.

Corporate coaching, implemented properly, can lead to the fundamental shift in the law firm from one where people receive directions from others to one where people are committed to doing things they care passionately about. In addition, this approach will:

1. With its emphasis on collaboration, foster creativity about issues and situations;
2. Establish a structure for both the establishment and fair measurement of goals and giving and receiving constructive feedback; and
3. Also provide a structure / process to develop new behaviours and competencies.

One simplified workable approach after selecting an external consultant to work with would be to:

1. Hold expectation setting session with administrative partners and lead administrators to outline strategic goals and objectives of the firm;
2. Conduct individual expectation setting sessions with each of the participants and determination of strategic alignment of the firm's and individual's expectations;
3. Have a weekend advance (there is already enough retreating in your lives) with an agenda that:
 - Starts with every manager and partner around the table having to explain what it is they do and what other managers and partners they are dependent upon and how in order for them to carry out their functions;
 - Then moves into a physical and mental team building exercise that makes managers and partners who didn't identify each other as having to depend upon each other now have to do so;
 - Then moves into an exercise that identifies the communication style of every one present providing insight into the most effective way to deal with each other;
 - The second day should be dedicated to imparting an awareness and recognition of the differences between managing people, leading people and coaching people;
and
 - Time should be allotted for smaller team building and coaching exercises preferably pairing partners and managers.
4. Establish appointments for everyone with a personal coach that will work one-on-one with them to help re-enforce lessons learned so that coaching becomes ingrained as the firm's approach to maximizing performance.

Like any other innovation enhancing approach, coaching, if not institutionalized will eventually be abandoned much like TQM, business process re-engineering, empowerment, to name a few.

As professional legal managers it is incumbent upon you to keep yourselves both refreshed and close to the leading edge of innovation. Obviously professional organizations such as ALA, LMA, and ACLEA and local chapters of these associations provide an enormous source of on-going refreshment through education and the opportunity to tap into the database of ideas from peers around the world.

Hoping that your firm will reacquaint itself with innovation will not work. Remember, as it has been so aptly pointed out - *hope is not a strategy*.

There does come a time however, especially when you have become a part of the “status quo”, when the best way to lead your firm to innovation is to leave. This time will be different for everyone but one clear precipitating event should be when the passion or pull to go to work is replaced by drive or a sense of being compelled or obligated to go to work.

Life is much too short to not enjoy what you are doing. While easy to say, tougher to do, you only need look to your colleagues who have done it, voluntarily or involuntarily, to see the positive impact such a change has had on their spirits.

Giving it your ALL requires us all to innovate or abdicate. While easy to say, tougher to do, you only need look to your colleagues who have done it, voluntarily or involuntarily, to see the positive impact such a change has had on their spirits.

Comments or Questions?



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