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LAW FIRMS

# Culture Shock

Almost all law firms value their workplace culture, but how do you make yours into one that will be embraced?

BY DANIELLE BRAFF

**W**inning cases and helping clients is crucial to a profitable law firm.

But there's another piece of the puzzle that's often neglected: company culture.

According to a Deloitte survey, 94% of executives and 88% of employees believe a distinct workplace culture is key to business success.

"Workplace culture" is a broad phrase encompassing everything from your firm's physical environment to the mental and psychological space you've created for your attorneys.

Essentially, it's the personality of your firm.

And if that personality is lacking in any way, it can wreak havoc on everyone working there.

"In running my firm for 20-plus years and growing to 30 employees, I can say firm culture is the most important thing a lawyer can establish,"

says Michael McCready, a personal injury lawyer and managing partner at McCready Law, which has offices in Chicago and Indiana. "A positive firm culture will pay the greatest dividends in the success of the firm."

But how do you create the work culture you want? And what do you do if you're unhappy with your current culture?

"Finding the perfect formula for culture takes time, and it is something we are still addressing," says Lia Dorsey, the president of the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals and director of diversity and inclusion at Dentons in Washington, D.C.

At Dentons, she instituted a multi-pronged approach: a pulse survey was shared with partners, who gave their views on diversity and inclusion; and there were conversations with leaders within the firm.



But before changing the culture, Dorsey says it's vital to take stock of the culture and programs as they currently stand. "One suggestion is conducting a firmwide cultural assessment," she says. "From there, you can analyze the results and develop relevant and actionable solutions."

## From the ground up

According to John Harrity, managing partner with Harrity & Harrity in Fairfax, Virginia, for the firm's first nine years of business, the attorneys were unhappy.

"The initial culture was negative, with no innovation or focus on service," Harrity says.

It was a toxic environment for everyone, according to Harrity. He and his colleagues tried to change the culture by encouraging new perspectives and outlining the qualities they wanted to emulate, but they weren't successful.

"In the end, we had to take a big step backward to go forward; we basically had to gut the firm and start over," he says.

Beginning in 2008, Harrity, with his partner and brother, Paul, implemented a full-scale rebuilding process, including revamping the hiring process to weed out toxicity. Over the next seven years, according to Harrity, the firm "let almost everyone go," and they were replaced with "more positive people."

In addition to the new rigorous hiring process, they implemented several committees and programs to maintain a positive culture. Today, Harrity says the firm has nearly twice as many people as it did in 2008, adding: "Our staff is happy, productive and fulfilled, and revenues have tripled."

## Growing pains

Maintaining an office's culture is especially important as it expands and grows.

Cayce Lynch, the San Diego-based administrative partner for civil defense firm Tyson & Mendes, says the

Lia Dorsey



Cayce Lynch

company culture there was defined organically the moment the two founders decided to start their own firm. But the firm now includes more than 300 employees, and they've had to add various structural elements to support its growth and inclusiveness.

To solidify the culture of transparency, they established regular firmwide

meetings where every team member has the opportunity to ask any question of the managing partner anonymously. And most recently, the firm introduced a diversity and inclusion committee aimed at providing its members with a more equitable work environment.

"We believe it is helpful for law firms to first define their values, then examine how the firm's current culture measures up against those values," Lynch says.

Even large firms can change their culture if they wish. Robert Bodian, managing partner of Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky and Popeo in New York City, says he always liked the open, friendly and supportive culture of his firm, but he felt that it could use some tweaks to make it more collaborative.

So in 2014, the firm overhauled the origination credit system and landed on one where no partner receives 100% of the origination credit: The ceiling is set at 75%. The remainder is either shared with a colleague who helped bring a client on board, or it is reserved for the

firm. Origination credit can be allocated by matter, so partners who help grow an existing client relationship can now receive origination credit for that, too.

"Management wanted to shift the focus from 'How much credit do we each get?' to 'How can we maximize the benefits to clients and, in turn, the overall revenue generation and profitability of the firm?'" Bodian says.

Since adopting the new system, Bodian adds, the partners have been increasingly working together to grow business, clients are receiving better service and diverse partners are getting more opportunities.

Mintz Levin is a far cry from Bodian & Eames, the small boutique firm Bodian founded in 1985 and worked at for 13 years, but his guiding principle there of "can do" still applies.

"That is what the mindset needs to be, and that is part of the culture that I have sought to foster," he says. "If you start by thinking about 'can do,' you can do a lot." ■

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