

PETER SCOTT CONSULTING

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How well do you know your partners?

The managing partner of a law firm was recently quoted as saying -

'Having established a new, clear strategy for the firm, we are now implementing the management and operational changes that will turn our strategic objectives into a successful operational reality.'

I would suggest that his firm has achieved the easy part of the plan. The difficult part - the implementation to turn that new clear strategy into reality, is likely to prove more difficult. Just because partners have agreed to a new strategic plan does not mean they will allow the plan to become reality. To achieve this will involve *taking your people with you on the journey.*

The words of that managing partner quoted above remind me of the story another managing partner told me about his experience at a partners' meeting when he outlined to the partners some of the future challenges the firm would be facing and what the firm would need to do to meet those challenges if it was to remain competitive in its market. The message was not well received by some partners, one of whom remarked -

'But we are not businessmen, we are lawyers!'

If a law firm has carried out a client feedback survey and found out from its clients what they think about the firm and what services and advice they will need from the firm in the future, then a clear strategic plan can be constructed, based around that feedback. However, even though a firm's plan may set out clearly what the firm will need to do to achieve a competitive advantage over rivals, will all the partners of the firm be willing and able to achieve appropriate performance levels to enable the firm to successfully compete?

To enable the consistent delivery to a firm's clients of what **they** value and seek from the firm will require skills and behaviours within the firm to be sufficiently aligned with delivery of that required standard of client service. A firm will need to identify those specific areas where both the firm overall and individual partners in particular may need to improve to meet higher standards.

What should our partners be doing more of, less of or differently if we are to achieve our objectives?

Surveys we have carried out for law firms show that criteria which clients apply when choosing which law firm to use include the following -

- skills and technical expertise;
- speed of response;
- fee levels;
- relationships with individuals;
- access and approachability;
- consistent delivery and results;
- size and depth of capability;
- specialisms (and the way in which a specialism is delivered);

And moreover, critical factors relating to performance which often drive **client satisfaction** include –

- meeting deadlines and keeping commitments;
- ability to offer advice quickly;
- keeping the client informed of progress;
- care and attention given to work;
- ability to communicate advice;
- billing as expected;
- providing excellent value;
- personable and likeable people/rapport with the team;
- quality of people;
- showing an interest in / knowledge of the client's business.

As the above responses from law firms' clients indicate, it is the performance and behaviour of a firm's people which determine whether or not a firm will be competitive. The ability to recruit and retain the best people will therefore be central to achieving success. A useful starting point is to consider whether your existing people, particularly your partners, are going to help you (or prevent you) achieving your goals, by asking questions such as these -

Do we have the 'right partners' on board to help us through these difficult times and to achieve our objectives?

If not, then how should we go about developing and / or recruiting 'the right partners'?

Are our equity and reward structures 'aligned' with achieving our objectives?

Are we fairly matching reward to contribution?

Do our appraisal systems enable us accurately, fairly and transparently to judge partners' 'performance'?

Can we say all our partners will be able and prepared to perform to the required levels to enable us to achieve our objectives?

If we judge that we have 'underperforming' partners, then how should we deal with these issues?

Should all our partners really be equity partners?

What can a managing partner of a law firm do to provide answers to questions such as the above, and to motivate partners to *'become businessmen as well as lawyers'*?

Experience of dealing with the implementation of strategic plans in law firms, both as a former managing partner and currently as an advisor to law firms, has tended to show that perhaps most importantly it is necessary to *'know your partners'*.

Two processes in particular can help you **to know your partners** –

Partner self evaluation

A self - evaluation questionnaire should be tailored to the specific needs and objectives of a law firm and can cover areas including –

- Personal drive and motivation
- Communication, influencing and relationships
- Commitment to learning
- Technical excellence
- Client development
- Management and leadership

In relation to each area partners can be asked what they regard as their particular strengths and what they would like to be better at. In this way a picture can be built of each partner's ambitions, insecurities and attitudes.

'360 degree' feedback

Increasingly it is being recognised that it is the people with whom partners work who are often in the best position to provide feedback on attitudes, performance and behaviour.

Accordingly techniques which can be described as 'all round feedback' or '360 degree feedback', whereby feedback is gathered from peers as well as from both more senior and more junior colleagues or various combinations of all or some of them, are increasingly being employed.

In particular providing all-round or 360° feedback can help by:

- Reinforcing what partners are already doing well (receiving this feedback is usually a very positive experience).
- Highlighting changes partners could easily make and that would have a positive impact on the performance of others (often people are blissfully unaware of the negative impact certain of their behaviours are having on others).

In addition the benefits of all-round or 360° feedback can include:

- Improving performance (the feedback will reinforce what partners are already doing well and will highlight ways in which they could improve).
- Improving the motivation and performance of staff (often even small changes in partners' behaviour can make a big impact on staff).
- Aiding in the retention of good people (who might leave because of perceived "bad behaviours" that could be addressed if only partners were made aware of the impact they are having).

An effective all-round or 360° feedback process can be immensely helpful in a firm which is attempting to bring about changes in partner performance and behaviour as a necessary part of implementing its strategic objectives.

A partner development programme

Processes such as self – evaluations and 360 degree feedback will often be employed as part of putting in place a partner development programme to raise standards of performance. This might need to cover, depending upon a firm's objectives and existing skills of the partners, business development, leadership and finance as well as the management of individual aspirations and client and internal relationships. Such programmes can be invaluable in helping partners understand what may be required of them in relation to their future performance and behaviour.

The outcome from such a programme is usually the formulation of a **development plan** for each partner (or it may be just one or two individuals in a firm who need help), which may often have objectives such as:

- The alignment of each partner's development plan with the overall objectives of the firm
- Helping each partner understand what is required of him / her in terms of performance, behaviour and attitude.
- Playing to partners' strengths
- Bringing partners up to minimum skills levels by developing them in any areas of weakness
- Helping partners better manage their time
- Assisting managing partners and others with management responsibilities to achieve an optimum split of their time between management, client work and business development, so they can best 'add value' to the firm.
- Building teams and addressing gearing issues
- Better managing people by learning how to deal with underperformance issues and providing appropriate feedback.
- Better delegation and supervision skills
- Helping partners to be more commercial by improving their financial management of clients
- Being more organised and 'tidier' (a desk piled with papers can be a serious risk issue)
- Thinking through the effect of actions on others and setting a good example
- Helping partners to improve presentational, public speaking or networking skills

- Using client connections more effectively for the benefit of the whole firm.
- Helping partners learn to embrace change

The above list of development initiatives is not intended to be exhaustive and each partner's development plan will need to be tailored to the needs of the firm and the partner.

The issues which difficult economic conditions have posed to law firms have highlighted problems which have often been present in the past but which now must be tackled. Those who are managing law firms will need to facilitate building higher partner performance if a firm's strategic objectives are to be achieved. However, while they can provide a great deal of help and encouragement to partners, ultimately it will be for the partners themselves to rise to the challenges.

If partners are not prepared to do so, then any previous options which may have existed for those who do not wish to change are no longer likely to be available to them or to the firm. Progress does not happen on its own – change must be made to happen.