

How To Snuff Out The Lone Wolf Law Firm Culture

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, New York (August 3, 2016, 6:12 PM ET) -- Many law firms today are plagued by a lone wolf mentality in which lawyers fail to collaborate when bringing in business and instead stick to an "eat what you kill" philosophy, destroying the possibility of a productive partnership in the process.

As more law firms merge and lateral movement continues to accelerate, the traditional fabric of the law partnership model has been ripped. A silo mentality in which lawyers feel the strain to compete to bill more hours and generate more business than their peers has arisen, and along with it, division, according to Donald Prophete, a name partner at Constangy Brooks Smith & Prophete LLP.

Part of that divisiveness is driven by many law firms' lack of focus on creating a culture where collaboration and community are valued, and instead placing too much emphasis on revenue generation, he said.

"The law firm of today is so driven by having lawyers hit the ground running and start billing immediately, that we spend very little time on the softer, nonfinancial transactions that are meant to eschew silos and individualistic approaches to the practice," he said.

Law firms as a general practice spend very little time and resources integrating lawyers from different firms properly, he explained, and often spend very few resources in addressing soft matters like integrating lawyers socially.

"So, what you have at the end of the day are a bunch of silos or lone wolf lawyers who are for all intents and purposes only sharing space with their so-called 'partners,'" he said.

Here, experts look at ways to create a more collaborative law firm culture.

Incentives

According to Sean Wajert, managing partner of Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP's Philadelphia office, there are a number of ways law firms can discourage the spread of a fractured culture, chief among them incentivizing collaboration.

The firm's compensation system can be altered to encourage good behavior and discourage those behaviors that are less desirable.

"Rewarding cooperation, sharing, teamwork can have a real impact on future behavior. Collaboration and delegation can be part of the formal evaluation and self-evaluation process," Wajert said.

Katherine Dudley Helms, managing shareholder of Ogletree Deakins Nash Smoak & Stewart PC's Columbia office, said that her firm of 750 lawyers has been able to successfully encourage a positive team spirit through its compensation structure.

"One of the factors now taken into account in our compensation reviews is the amount of work we sent to other offices and the amount of work we do for other offices," Dudley Helms said. "This is one manner in which our firm rewards cross-selling and both sharing work and assisting in supporting others' work. It becomes an expected part of the firm culture and is the message that is consistently reinforced by firm management."

Prophete said that he believes that the prevailing law firm practice of awarding 100 percent origination credits to the lawyer who makes the first contact with a client is passé and promotes a "me against my partners" attitude that fosters the prototypical lone wolf lawyer.

"Today, companies are larger, legal departments are more varied and larger, and maintain a number of different practice group leaders and decision makers. The notion that a lawyer who opens a matter from a single client source of contact should own the entire client relationship is one that needs to be abolished," he said.

Only bad habits are borne from these policies, according to Prophete, who said that law firms should instead turn to a more progressive approach of dividing originations among partners who show the most meaningful relationships in bringing in the work.

Community

When working to create a law firm where partners operate as a team, it is important to implement policies that foster a sense of community, an effort that starts at the very top with firm leaders, according to Neal Manne, a managing partner of Susman Godfrey LLP.

Manne said that his firm's "unusually strong culture of professional collaboration" started when Steve Susman founded the firm in 1980, and he and his late wife Karen treated it as an extension of their own family.

He explained that the traditions and practices that began when the firm was founded have lent themselves to a sense of camaraderie there as it has grown into a national firm with multiple offices and more than 100 trial lawyers.

Creating a sense of community among lawyers that goes beyond just a professional relationship to the personal can be a powerful tool for building trust and goodwill among attorneys, experts agreed, which goes a long way toward attorney retention and creating a harmonious and productive law firm.

According to Manne, one of the ways his firm has accomplished bringing lawyers together to connect personally is that the firm's founders started the tradition of encouraging lawyers to stay at each other's homes when traveling to a city where the firm has an office.

"My kids grew up around many out-of-town Susman Godfrey lawyers who were at the breakfast table in

the morning," Manne said. "These are little things, but they have been effective in creating a genuinely familial feeling among our lawyers, and maintaining a strong firm culture of which everyone is a part."

Culture

In addition to fostering community, a clear expectation from firm leadership that work is shared and collaboration is commonplace can create a deeper law firm culture where the "eat what you kill" business generation mentality is snuffed out, experts said.

"Firm leaders need to set a proper example," Wajert said. "Modeling good firm citizenship and collaboration can be impactful, and it may help if leaders have a ready example of how collaboration and cooperation can benefit the firm, and an example or two about missed opportunities because of lone wolf behavior. This helps foster a collaborative environment."

He explained that the use of industry-focused teams can promote cross-practice area cooperation and, to the extent clients are willing, firms can gather feedback at regular intervals or at the conclusion of a matter by simply asking how well the lawyers performed as a team.

Manne said that, at his law firm, internal policies and practices contribute to a continued culture of working together.

"There are no departments, practice groups or permanent teams at our firm," he said. "Everyone works with everyone else, over time."

He explained that case teams are not city-specific and usually consist of lawyers from two or three different offices. He added that professional advancement can also be used as a tool to fight discontent among colleagues.

"We do not have an 'up or out' approach to partnership consideration. We hire associates with the hope that all of them will perform well enough to eventually become partners and this lets our associates be genuinely supportive of each other, rather than competitive," Manne said.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Emily Kokoll.