

Top-Down Business Development Influence

A Managing Partner's Responsibility to Shape Firm Culture

By Peter Johnson

I can vividly recall my time as the managing partner of a small 40-attorney firm in Boston. Back in those days, the words “business” and “development” were rarely used in the same sentence with respect to managing partner responsibilities. My role was far more administrative and financial — at that point, there was more than enough business for our attorneys to meet their billing goals!

“These days,” however, thanks to an ever-evolving economic and legal landscape, it is imperative for the managing partner to also lead business development initiatives. While many firms now enlist the assistance of marketing and business development personnel, successful and effective managing partners are leading the effort in both thought and action. The managing partner is responsible for creating, protecting and enhancing a culture that is focused on client service, development and retention. Although he or she may rely upon others to implement various initiatives, it is the managing partner who sets the tone and standard.

These are not just my thoughts. I enlisted the assistance of friends and colleagues who serve as managing partners, CMOs and directors of professional development at law firms across the country. I asked their thoughts on characteristics and behaviors of managing partners

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who are successfully advancing their firm’s business development culture.

ASPECTS OF A STRONG CULTURE

Based on my discussions with colleagues, the following are characteristics of a firm with a strong business development culture:

- Everyone is expected to contribute to business development initiatives.
- The firm has a (laser-like) client service focus.
- Attorneys maintain consistent, frequent and relevant communication with clients.
- There is excellent internal communication regarding clients, business development and cross-selling.
- Management prominently supports marketing and business development efforts.
- Compensation is aligned with both client service and business development efforts and results.
- Attorneys have business development plans in place, and business development activities are being tracked (and attorneys are held accountable).
- There is a common vision of “who we are” — attorneys are able to articulate what differentiates their firm from others.
- The firm is industry focused; attorneys understand their clients’ business.
- The firm and attorneys contribute to the community.
- Business development is an agenda item at all partner, practice group, associate and staff meetings.
- Clients “belong” to the firm and not individual attorneys.
- The firm embraces technology.
- There is a high level of trust among partners, associates and support staff.

None of the above points should come as a surprise. So what must a

managing partner do to achieve that culture? My colleagues have offered insightful suggestions:

HOW TO ACHIEVE A BIZ DEV CULTURE

1. “Know your firm and project it authentically.” The managing partner needs to understand the character, culture and values of the firm, and to facilitate the authentic expression of the same, both inside and out. Any projection of the firm that is not authentic will not be successful — identifying the core culture and values that will make the firm appealing and attractive to potential clients will empower the firm to be the best and to establish successful and long lasting client partnerships.

2. “Communicate and reinforce the message.” Too often, managing partners miss the opportunity to reinforce business development messages, and are distracted by other consuming administrative issues. They need to discuss business development at meetings with practice group leaders, partners, associates and staff. Take every opportunity possible to discuss recent successes, challenges, and upcoming events and opportunities.

3. “Support and empower the marketing and business development team.” Business development personnel tend to be overworked, underappreciated, and do not often receive the deference they deserve. Many lawyers act as if the rules do not apply to them and refuse to cooperate with marketing personnel. This leads to a demoralized department and a stagnant culture. The managing partner must address those who don’t conform.

“Our managing partner sets me up for success, so I can contribute fully and engage with the attorneys as a peer in the conversation. He starts meetings with an opening: ‘I’ve invited our marketing team here so they can come along side you and help the you and the firm

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Sales Speak

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drive the strategy behind your plan, assist you with implementing your practice plans, and help you hold the members of your practice group accountable.' Our practice leaders take their cues from him, and then include our team members in communications and planning on both an individual and team level."

4. "Conduct client assessments or interviews." Dedicate time to meet with key clients of the firm. The capacity for self-deception is limitless. Too often, we make assumptions about client loyalty and client service, and regrettably, many of the assumptions are incorrect. A client interview initiative is one of the most effective ways to ensure client loyalty and a strong client service culture. A client interview can shore up weaknesses, reinforce strengths, and provide insights into best practices of competitor firms. Information, trends and themes from those meetings can be shared with all attorneys and used to craft the annual business development plan.

5. "Use compensation as a management tool." People do that which is measured and rewarded. You can change behavior by utilizing compensation as a management tool. The managing partner should be a strong advocate in aligning compensation with business development focus, efforts and results. If the firm truly embraces a marketing culture, then the compensation system needs to be sufficiently flexible to reward those who have contributed to building this culture. Given that most law firms' compensation systems are firmly established and unlikely to change significantly, the only hope for modification of behavior is to have management clearly communicate their expectations — not just general encouragement, but specific and measurable expectations. For example:

- Lawyers who manage large clients will have team meetings and develop a plan for retention and growth;

- Lawyers who insist on investing in time-consuming events will have preplanned meetings in which they will identify targeted prospects and set goals for new business;
- Lawyers who are involved in responding to RFPs will include management/ business development personnel in selecting the best teams; therefore,
- Establish a discretionary bonus pool that rewards cross-selling and teamwork

6. "Your desk is a dangerous place from which to watch the world!" A managing partner must do more than simply dictate and promote the culture — he/she needs to lead by example and action. The managing partner can foster this culture by figuratively "walking the talk," and by literally walking the halls. Conduct ad hoc meetings with attorneys and staff, asking "How have we promoted client service and business development initiatives today?"

"Our managing partner is very good about walking the halls and telling people what they've done right. He is quick to recognize a team's contribution, and will thank the members of that team. This goes beyond the normal 'way to go.' He gives specific feedback about what he understood went so well about the 'win.' He gives the attorneys a sense of pride regarding their business development efforts, and because he is a rainmaker himself, people know he's not just talking the talk."

7. "Get involved with pitches and cross-selling." The managing partner should be one of the most uniquely qualified persons in the firm, apart from the CMO or Marketing Director, to have the most comprehensive knowledge of the firm's clients and matters. Thus, the managing partner can be a tremendous resource for cross-selling opportunities. This may be motivation to include your managing partner when pitch teams are being assembled.

8. "Provide or support business development training." Many attorneys still believe that developing business is merely a function of doing good legal work. However, marketing and business development is not taught in law schools ... yet. Enlightened law firms are making training and coaching available to those who do not have the skills, but do have the potential and the motivation. Further, training and coaching demonstrates the firm's commitment to its attorneys, and can reinforce the business development culture.

"Our firm is in its fourth year of an attorney coaching program, and we've seen a dramatic increase in interest in the program this year, partly because our managing partner has been a steady proponent of it."

9. "Neutralize the obstacles." Obstacles to developing a great business development culture come in all different shapes and sizes, and managing partners need to identify and deal with those challenges. Sometimes all it takes is one strident voice to negatively impact the culture, and a managing partner needs to address detractors head on.

CONCLUSION

My colleagues agree that among a managing partner's many responsibilities is creating, protecting and enhancing a firm culture that is focused on client service, development and retention. While the partner will most certainly need to rely upon others to help with the implementation of supporting initiatives, this individual, by nature of their position, has the ability to set the firm's tone and standard. A managing partner is naturally the firm's best spokesperson and change agent for all things business development-related. Start leading, and the troops will follow.

While many good thoughts and objectives may be included in this article, it is by no means comprehensive. And that's where you come in! What are some trends, themes and ideas you have seen and heard that would strengthen this list? Contact me to continue the conversation.

