LEGAL
MANAGEMENT
THE MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF LEGAL ADMINISTRATORS

10 Ways to Build a Flourishing Law Firm Culture Around Your Values

By Scott Deming

Culture cannot flourish if individuals do not sustain it. Whether it's a beautiful or horrific culture, it does not exist without one individual after another choosing to support it. In other words, if one person after another shifts away from a set of practices and beliefs that are the core of any culture, that culture eventually ceases to exist. This doesn't mean there is no society or company, but that surely the culture has vanished.

Sure — systems, bureaucracies, policies, rules, regulations, laws and other individuals impact your life. But when it comes time to choose who you are and who you want to be, it all comes down to you. You may be the one who can solve a problem that keeps a client from jumping ship. You may be the one with a great idea like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs or someone who wins a Nobel Prize. You may be the one whose mentoring changes lives for the better.

Although you are responsible for choosing your own values, what you do next is going to involve more than just you. In other words, you and multiple other individuals in your law firm will make the difference between a company culture that lasts and one that does not.

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STEP 1. SET AN EXAMPLE

If you are recruiting people into a law firm that reflects a carefully articulated purpose and set of values, you must begin and end your day thinking about and acting on those values. It starts with the way you interact with each person at every level within your organization and outside it. Make sure your values and purpose are known to all in the law firm and that they provide a core framework for daily operations.

STEP 2. CREATE STAKEHOLDERS

It's not enough to bring people on board who share your values and purpose. It's important to keep these people on board. Depending on the size of the organization, you should have regular, organization-wide meetings where people can share best practices, learn about others' jobs, and discover how areas of the organization overlap. Department-wide meetings may be sufficient for large companies.

STEP 3. PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

If you are going to create an environment and a culture of trust, transparency and honesty, you must live it every day and not just preach it. You must say the things you believe are true, and you must do the things you say you will do.

STEP 4. LISTEN TO OTHERS

Believe it or not, many people don't know how to have a conversation that actually produces good ideas. Lots of times, we don't listen to each other, but rather, simply wait for our chance to get our point across. The point of listening is to understand and, more often than not, to take action on what you hear.

STEP 5. CONFIRM OR CORRECT THROUGH DIALOGUE

Ask the person you're speaking with to confirm that your recapitulation of their meaning is accurate, or to correct you. After all, the ideas you're trying to get right are theirs, not yours. Yes, the one communicating has the burden speaking clearly, but help to improve the person's articulation. In addition, you want other employees to take responsibility for what they say and do, so it's important to know you have the right information.

STEP 6. SITUATE THE CONVERSATION

See if you can situate what someone is saying within the organization's established framework of values, and try to find a connection or some alignment with the organization's purpose. Doing so will help keep the focus on why employees showed up for work.

STEP 7. CONSIDER ASSUMPTIONS

When we engage in dialogue, we make certain assumptions that are often not explicit. They're simply the givens we take to be true. Check with the speaker to see if what you believe is correct. As with verbal disputes, it's often the case that our disagreements occur because of what is not said. In other words, we don't state our assumptions, and we believe we know the assumptions of others, but we are wrong.

STEP 8. GIVE OTHERS' IDEAS A TRY

Disagreement does not mean stalemate. If you and someone in your organization disagree over an idea or a process, but a decision is made to implement it, make sure everyone gives it the same support they would show if they thought it was the best thing since sliced bread. It's your job to get people on board and excited about the direction of a program, process or policy, whether it is your idea or not. It's easy to help things fail; it's a lot harder to see them succeed.

STEP 9. MANAGE CHANGE

Change is scary for most people. They don't know where they fit in with this change, or if they'll be left out. It's important, therefore, that whenever change is on the horizon, those who are responsible for deciding to implement it communicate their reasons clearly and thoroughly. People need to understand the context for change as well as how change will impact their workload, workflow, planning and so forth.

STEP 10. REMEMBER YOU ARE IN THE RELATIONSHIP BUSINESS

Never forget that human interactions are always meaningful at some level. You've probably had interactions that, for some reason, were really meaningful to others, though you thought them to be rather pedestrian. And the shoe has likely been on the other foot, too. You can never anticipate what is going to impact someone else's life in a really meaningful way, but be aware that it's always possible. If your interactions reflect your values, then you can always be confident that you have contributed to creating a meaningful culture wherever you go.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A media-savvy speaker and compelling leadership trainer, **Scott Deming** has been changing company cultures for 30 years with his approach to critical thinking and value-driven branding. He speaks, trains and consults with large and small companies, helping them to create cultures that matter and cultures that last.

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