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The Leadership Deficit: Impact and Opportunities for Law Firm Leaders

By Terri Hartwell Easter



The Great Recession changed the landscape for many businesses, including law firms and legal departments. The legal business appears to be forever changed, and that includes the workforce and their expectations.

Never has the need for effective leadership in the legal profession been greater. In fact, according to a recent study, the “leadership deficit” was among the highest in professional services firms. This deficit is pronounced, and it is being felt in the legal industry every day.

Here’s a snapshot of the current dynamic:

- The U.S. Census Bureau estimates approximately 10,000 Baby Boomers turn 65 each day, a trend expected to continue until about 2030. Looming on the horizon is their retirement and the accompanying brain drain.
- Millennials: While a smaller group in whole numbers, it is expected to comprise up to 75 percent of the available workforce by 2025. The expectations these young people bring to the table for their careers will require a serious

attitude adjustment on the part of leadership. Millennials are more focused on family, social justice and making a difference — not necessarily making money. Their technology and social media savvy will present its own set of challenges, including demands for virtual workplaces and greater autonomy.

- The proliferation of mergers and acquisitions has created a mish-mash of cultures in various sectors, including the legal industry. This includes clashes of expectations, vision and values, as well as a severe shortage of qualified leaders.

A growing body of research supports the importance of diversity and inclusion as a part of the engagement strategy

THE DATA

How equipped are today's leaders to manage these seismic changes? Not well, according to a recent American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC) study commissioned by *T.H. Easter Consulting*. Today's leaders are resistant to any change in leadership style.

In a survey of 547 professionals, including leaders of professional services concerns, APQC researchers found that leaders are deficient in the competencies they themselves identify as necessary for future success. Cultivation of the soft skills vital to addressing imminent challenges — strategic planning, change management, knowledge sharing, listening and emotional intelligence — is actively resisted.

Today's leaders are hard skills devotees focused on results, analytical bottom liners who are competitive and driven. Though these skills will never be obsolete, they are not adequate to drive the employee engagement required to navigate workplaces of today and tomorrow.

It is easy to correlate this leadership deficit to the 2015 Gallup Q12 engagement survey results that show that only 31 percent of its 2.5 million respondents are engaged at work.

THE ANSWERS

Leadership quality drives strong employee engagement. While we use the term "employee engagement," its principles extend to partners and other professionals who may be owners in your business. It is important to build leadership capabilities in all your partners, attorneys and staff.

For example, many organizations have lost middle managers, the intermediaries between senior management and those who do the work. So we must bridge the perspectives between senior leaders and employees to ensure:

- a shared vision for business goals,
- appetite for effecting change that is needed to be competitive,
- willingness to address conflict that inevitably surfaces in highly competitive and busy environments, and
- a commitment to valuing the contributions of everyone.

Further, a growing body of research supports the importance of diversity and inclusion as a part of the engagement strategy. We would argue that diversity and inclusion is both a leadership competency and a business imperative, just like financial acumen, subject matter knowledge and business intelligence. Diversity extends beyond just who is part of your organization to how it impacts problem-solving, productivity and decision-making. The richness that results from bringing diverse perspectives and an inclusive style will distinguish your workplace and engage your workforce. Is your firm's culture ready for an engagement strategy?

1. Have you measured employee engagement? Is employee engagement generally high in your firm?
2. Is there a plan for engaging diverse partners, attorneys and staff? Is your firm leadership fully engaged in supporting diversity in all of its applications?
3. Are you prepared to manage accountability for achieving employee engagement results?

Creating a highly engaged workplace is not easy. It requires commitment to change. It isn't a matter of numbers; it's the success of all of your partners, attorneys and staff that will truly validate your leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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