

Is Your Culture Deliberate?



By Ioana Good

Culture clearly has a powerful effect. Studies have shown time and again that the right culture increases productivity, wellness, results, retention, and resilience. According to the Harvard Business Review, there is a growing body of research on positive organizational psychology, which demonstrates that a cut-throat environment is harmful to productivity over time. A positive environment will lead to dramatic benefits for employers. The right company culture will also help overcome structural barriers. Yet, all too often, companies rarely stop to consider the impact of decisions on culture because everyone is too busy trying to satisfy clients, employees, and shareholders.

Culture does not happen overnight. It is a function of the firm's evolution and decisions made over time. Ultimately, company culture can be broken down to an alignment of purpose. If the organization's culture aligns with the employees that work there, happiness abounds, productivity soars, and the organization thrives. But creating and sustaining that purpose is no small feat. Organizations are faced with constant change - whether through new leadership, market changes, or unforeseen events like a worldwide pandemic.

Fortunately, many organizations around the legal space recognize the importance of wellness, a significant driver of a thriving culture. Some firms have signed the ABA Well-Being Pledge and offer resources and confidentiality to help lawyers with substance-use disorders and mental health issues. IWIL also developed the Well-Being Toolkit for Lawyers and Legal Employers. IWIL identifies six dimensions in people's lives that they need to pay attention to: emotional, intellectual, occupational, physical, spiritual, and social. The organization offers a framework and guidelines for law firms to follow. The program also encourages open, firm-wide discussions regarding wellness.

Stinson LLP, a law firm with 12 offices nationwide, signed the pledge and has dedicated internal committees and programs to wellness, retention, and D&I efforts. Krista Larson, the firm's new Director of Well-Being, says that work and life are becoming increasingly integrated. "This was true before the

pandemic, but the pandemic exacerbated things. Thriving at work means thriving in life and vice versa. Therefore, we must pay attention to the whole person when investing in our people.”

The pandemic made it clear that there is no one size fits all solution. “Variety is key. What works best for me to maintain well-being isn't necessarily going to look the same as the next person,” says Larson. “Each of us faces our own challenges and circumstances. It's important for organizations to offer a variety of resources and to educate on different strategies so that people can identify and put into practice what's going to work best for them as unique individuals.” As part of this effort, Larson works closely with other key people leaders, including the firm's Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Ann Jenrette-Thomas, and the Chief Attorney Recruiting and Development officer, Lynda Moore.

Larson holds a master’s degree in Applied Positive Psychology from University of Pennsylvania, and she has spent a large part of her career working in-house and as a consultant in the talent development space. She says the discipline leverages evidence-based theories to help individuals and organizations reach their fullest potential. The definitive focus is on giving people the tools to bolster resilience so that they can weather the storm and not be depleted by it when the next challenge comes.

Ben Horowitz, who wrote “What You Do Is Who You Are – How to Create Your Business Culture,” notes that culture only works if the leader visibly participates and champions it. He goes on to say there are three high-level decision-making styles that influence culture: 1. My way or the highway 2. Everyone has a say 3. Everyone has input, then I decide. In business, Horowitz says the third style works best. CEOs are judged on the efficiency and process of their decisions. Communication is equally important - leaders, clients, and employees need to understand the initiatives and how they are part of them. Without clear communication and direction from leadership, culture suffers.

When Stephen Janik founded Ball Janik LLP, it was essential to provide an inclusive culture where employees meet regularly to discuss challenges and opportunities. Ultimately, he led the charge, and today, the firm has grown with coast-to-coast offices, an expanding base of clients, and talented people. Janik commits time to mentor younger attorneys, communicates often, and has succeeded in his mission to create a culture of superior work, loyalty, inclusiveness, and community service.

“Our employees are the roots that anchor our firm. We recognize that sometimes people struggle, and we want the firm to be a place they can turn to address this,” says Heather Oden, Ball Janik’s Chief Operating Officer. The firm has added to its healthcare coverage to offer more ways for people to find helpful resources when they need them. They also provide discounts on gym memberships and massage services to help encourage and ensure a healthy body and mind. While the firm is spread out through the US, Ball Janik employees meet regularly in committees where they come up with different programs and incentives to innovate and improve processes and culture.

“As the saying goes, you can’t pour from an empty cup,” says Larson. “How can we expect our employees to show up at their best for our clients when they aren't thriving themselves?”

Ioana Good is a regular contributor to The Mid-Market Report and is the founder of Promova, an international communication, and PR agency. She is the co-chair of the LMA International Professional Advocacy Committee. She may be reached at igood@getpromova.com.