LEADERSHIP FOR LAWYERS LLC

Mark Beese
President

303-913-8830
mark@leadershipforlawyers.com
www.leadershipforlawyers.com

28843 Cedar Circle
Evergreen, CO 80439

Internal Networking: A Critical Skill for Lawyers

One would expect to see this in a large, multi-office global firm. But here, in a 30-attorney, single-office firm? One barely large enough to fill two floors of a downtown office building? I should not have been surprised, but I was. They were suffering from NDD – Network Deficit Disorder – a malady that, if left untreated, threatens the vitality and vibrancy of a law practice.

There is a lot of buzz about social and business networking today. Attorneys and other professionals are trying to figure out how to best use Twitter, LinkedIn and Martindale Hubbell Connected to meet and impress potential clients. What many firms, large and small, often overlook is the value of networking internally to leverage existing connections, experience and resources.

This law firm presented typical symptoms of acute NDD:

- Attorneys not knowing about each other's practices, areas of expertise and professional interests
- Attorneys not knowing about each other's personal and professional network
- Attorneys not knowing about each other's current and recent work for clients
- Absence of a firm-wide contact relationship management system (CRM)

It is easy to get caught up in client work and one's own business development efforts. Email and working 'virtually' makes it easier to communicate electronically and avoid taking time to meet with people face-to-face. For firms that have attorneys and staff on multiple floors, cities and countries, recovering from NDD is all the more difficult.

Still, effective cross-marketing (or cross-serving, as David Maister puts it) is dependent on our capacity to know the capabilities of other attorneys in our firm *and* trust them to deliver the best expertise, insight and service to our valued clients. As more clients pursue *convergence* programs, that is, reducing the number of law firms to a handful who do a wide swath of work, it is increasingly important to communicate the range of experience and expertise under the firm's virtual roof.

Treatment for NDD is a cocktail of *knowing* and *trust*. Every attorney needs to take on the responsibility of *knowing* how the other attorneys in the firm could help their clients. This means understanding each other's capabilities, experiences, past projects, cases, current and former clients, former firms and work experience. It means understanding each other's personal and professional networks including community involvement, board memberships, and bar and industry association networks.

But it is not enough to know of each other's experience and connections. For an attorney to refer a client or prospect to another in the firm, one must be able to *trust* his/her colleagues implicitly. Unfortunately, this type of trust is a rare commodity in many firms.

Firm leaders need to create an environment that fosters both knowing and trust. Taken together, firms will benefit by realizing increased teamwork, productivity and cross-serving clients. Here are some ideas on how to increase knowing and trust.

Knowing

The goal of knowing is to answer three networking questions:

- Who does what?
- Who knows what?
- Who knows whom?

While there are high-tech tools a firm could use to store and disseminate information, the most effective tactics are often the most simple:

- At practice or industry group meetings, take ten minutes to talk about what people are working on now, or a matter that they recently concluded, as well as their business development targets (name names).
- At least once a year, hold a group meeting off-site to get to know each other better. If your firm has multiple offices, bring in the folks from the regional offices. Plan activities that lead to people telling their stories and sharing their experiences. For example, break up into small groups aligned by industry, area of law or interest and have each group present a summary of their projects over the past year by creating a mural of crayon drawings, magazine cuttings or play dough.
- Find ways to tell each other's success stories: Profile an "Attorney and Staff Member of the Month" on the firm intranet. Email a monthly "Success Stories" highlighting superior client service provided by an attorney or staff member to everyone in the firm. Circulate web links of articles written by attorneys. Post notices about people's speaking gigs, appointments and personal achievements. Use multiple channels of communication.
- Take a page from "speed-dating" and create a "speed-networking" event the next time your firm brings in a new class of associates or laterals. Prime the 5-minute conversations with suggested topics, such as "tell me about a time you 'WOWed' a client" or "What community volunteer or pro bono project gave you the most satisfaction?"
- In practice and industry groups, make it a habit to share information about existing and prospective clients, seeking information and connections that could open new opportunities.

- Develop a habit of reading the biographies of fellow attorneys from your firm's website. Google them. You might be surprised by what you learn.

Contact Relationship Management (CRM) systems help attorney answer the "who knows whom" question. CRM systems range from simple to complex, but a CRM worth its salt will be able to facilitate introductions by showing connections between people. Networked attorneys use this function to leverage relationships within the firm to gain introductions to prospective clients and referral sources outside of the firm.

Likewise, online social/professional networking tools such as LinkedIn.com, Twitter and Martindale Hubbell Connected are powerful tools for not just professional networking, but also to discover their work history and who they consider "friends".

Trust

Knowing is one thing, trust is something completely different. For internal networking to be successful, you must be able to answer the following questions:

- Whom can I trust to help me on an important "bet the company" matter?
- Whom can I trust to refer an important to client?
- Whom can I trust to be a mentor?
- Whom can I trust to succeed me when it is time to move on?

Developing trust requires time, energy and a degree of personal risk. It requires connecting with people one-on-one. It requires exchange: sharing one's own background and stories and showing interest in others. It requires being vulnerable, opening up to others and being real. Consider:

- Make a goal of getting to know someone else in your firm by meeting with them over coffee or lunch once a week.
- Develop a list of questions to ask the other person, including some non-conventional ones that reveal who they are as people. Seek to understand their professional capabilities and their personal aspirations. Be quiet and listen for more than 75% of the time.
- Take an associate or someone else to a non-profit community event and introduce her/him around. Engage them in a dialogue about the mission of the organization and find out what community service/pro bono work interests them.
- Look for ways to build 'network capital' by helping other people, facilitating strategic introductions, opening doors and performing random acts of kindness.
- Be reliable and consistent. Demonstrate in the little things, like being on time and responding to emails, to communicate that you can be relied on for bigger things.

- Actively seek constructive feedback and act on that feedback. Demonstrate that you are committed to continuous improvement.
- Take a few minutes and write a glowing recommendation on a colleagues' LinkedIn profile.
- Craft your story. Consider why you do what you do. What do you like about it? How did you get here? Who helped you? Who inspired you? What gets you charged up to work on Monday morning? What are your values? How do they play out in your life? Look for ways to tell your story and ask others about their story.

Does your firm suffer from Network Deficit Disorder? Consider how you can improve how people *know* and *trust* each other as an antidote. Taken together, a firm can leverage the power of their internal connections to be a considerable strategic advantage.

Mark Beese is President of Leadership for Lawyers, LLC. He helps lawyers build strong business development and leadership skills. Based in Evergreen Colorado, he serves law firms of all sizes across North America. www.leadershipforlawyers.com blog: www.leadershipforlawyers.typepad.com email: mark@leadershipforlawyers.com