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MARKETING THE LAW FIRM

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To Have or Not to Have Partner Reviews: A Reflection of Firm Culture

By Sharon Meit Abrahams

Firms are conducting their mid-year associate reviews around this time. What about partners? Typically, partner feedback is given by means of their new annual compensation. If your firm is not doing partner reviews now is the time to start. As firms are looking for ways to increase retention and survive the great resignation conducting partner reviews might hold the key. Doing reviews makes a statement about your firm's culture.

Firms that conduct annual partner reviews often rely on a self-report from the partner and an analysis of the partner's statistics (hours, origination, etc.). This quantitative data will not help combat the outflow of associates. What firms need are qualitative reviews that discuss and reveal the impact of partners' behaviors. This reveals the firm's culture.

Upward vs. 360-Degree Surveys

There is a distinction between upward reviews and 360-degree feedback surveys, although sometimes the two terms are used interchangeably. An upward review is when employees, attorneys, and other team members evaluate the individual or manager who assigns and oversees their work product. The questions are typically around delegation, feedback, and management skills. This allows the subordinates to anonymously share feedback about behaviors that impacts their work and professional development.

Upward feedback is an excellent tool for identifying leaders throughout the firm. Good leaders are open to critique because they are continuously listening and learning from others. Outside of law, upward reviews tend to enhance job satisfaction because employees believe their input is valued. If executed correctly associates and employees can develop a sense that the firm will react accordingly to information garnered from the reviews.

A 360-degree review is conducted across the organization and includes feedback from employees, associates, peers, superiors, and occasionally clients. One of the main differences is that the reviewers are rating statements about the individual on a scale from 1 to 10. The person being rated also completes a self-evaluation. The feedback requested on a 360-degree survey encompasses a

variety of areas such as leadership and management skills, strategic vision, decisiveness, communication styles, and core values, among others.

Embracing either of these review formats would be a positive reflection of a firm's culture.

Which One Is Better

Often, associates can be concerned about participating in upward reviews, and partners tend to avoid both types of reviews. This is especially true in smaller firms or small practice groups where the ratio is fewer associates to partners. Associates fear their feedback will have repercussions. Too often, this dynamic means that firms do not move forward with upward reviews.

360-degree surveys incorporate more individuals, giving employees and lawyers who directly report to the individual as well as peers and clients a safe way to provide positive and constructive feedback in an anonymous fashion. This feedback keeps partners accountable for their decisions, behaviors, and impact on others.

Some partners will resist. "With 360-degree surveys," Michael Coates, managing director at Protostar Leadership Development says, "The off-the-record reason was always the same, that a few influential partners were nervous of allowing peers and staff to provide feedback about them." This is why it is so important that everyone involved understands a 360-degree survey is for personal development and the information gathered should never be used for promotion, recruitment, or compensation decisions.

Why Do 360s?

Large and small companies use 360-degree surveys to boost their leaders' confidence and to uncover areas for improvement. This can apply to law firms and corporate legal departments as well.

As an example, a study showed that malpractice claims were reduced after a group of doctors all covered by the same malpractice insurance, went through a 360-degree survey process. These physicians learned to improve their teamwork and communication skills with colleagues, staff, and patients — and it's possible for lawyers to benefit in the same fashion.

"Attorneys need to know how they are impacting their staff, and they should also know how they are perceived by their peers," Rosenberg explains. "By understanding the perceptions of others, they can adjust their behaviors to create an engaging culture and achieve success."

Why Now?

Law firms are growing accustomed to having data analytics and metrics drive their financial commitments, but they lag when it comes to the people side of law. Karthick Sundar, Managing Partner at Survey Research Associates, says that needs to change, "the leaders and firms will start viewing performance management as attorney development, with people growth and coaching being the focal point of the process."

Oz Benamram, now Chief Knowledge & Innovation Officer at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett, reflected on his experience at another firm. "The 360-degree feedback process most definitely made me a better leader," Benamram says. "After hearing that I was a micro-manager three years in a row, it was impossible not to address it if I wanted my team to keep taking the process (and me) seriously."

Candidates are looking at firm culture when deciding which firm to join so having the data that proves the firm does care about their partners' development speaks loud and clear.

Is it worth it?

The corporate world has utilized 360-degree feedback surveys as a development tool for all levels of leadership for years. Now, law firms should do the same. When companies invest in their people, culture improves, retention increases, and ultimately, profit goes up — and the same goes for law firms.

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