

A Collective Shrug of the Shoulders: What's a Leader To Do About Apathy?

By Karen MacKay

This article originally appears in the October 17th edition of The Lawyers Weekly, published by Lexis Nexis.

Over the past few weeks I have listened to the frustrations of a number of law firm leaders as well as partners and associates who are the professional talent – indeed the only true assets of a firm. They shared stories about initiatives that got a lot of air time at meetings of their colleagues and then nothing happened. The ideas are sound, the enthusiasm is evident and members of the group commit to accomplishing something important, and as soon as they leave the room the idea fizzles like a balloon that has been left long after the party is over. The idea shrivels and quietly sinks to the floor.

My colleague Gerry Riskin calls this the “Mount Everest Syndrome”. It begins with big promises. Perhaps the agreement to develop a group business plan that includes commitments to increase profile in the usual ways (writing six articles, speaking at three conferences, personal visits to the group’s top ten clients and telephone calls to a list of prospects.) The group promises to get all this done within three months.

Three months hence the group meets again and collectively deliver nothing. Why? A major file meant everyone was simply too busy on billable

work to get anything done. All is forgiven. After all, the best excuse for not investing if the future is being too busy with client work today.

As this cycle repeats, it creates skepticism and cynicism amongst group members. They stop working as a group and they focus on their own work, safe in the knowledge of what is rewarded and comfortable that there are no consequences for inaction. In other words they all draw their shoulders up towards their ears and quietly drop them back down.

As we study culture in law firms we know that there is a direct correlation between the strength or depth of various aspects of culture and firm profitability. The aspect of culture relevant to this discussion is vision. That is the degree to which groups create and share a vision for the group; the degree to which people in the group actually believe that the group has a strategy and that it will be executed; and the degree to which people understand how their individual contribution breathes life into the vision and strategy.



It is the role of leadership to create a vision for the organization. A vision that is delivered with passion, a message that connects with people on a personal level and one that is believable and has the power to awaken desire such that individuals will take action. Within the framework of a vision, highly intelligent, highly autonomous professionals must set their own goals. The role of the leader is to create the vision and then to support and encourage individuals to join them. Further, to support and encourage individuals to achieve their own goals.

Reflecting on the frustration expressed by these lawyers, three things come to mind. First, the group may not have a history of executing. Part of the problem is that many law firms are led by volunteers – lawyers who are very involved in their practice and contribute to leadership and management roles as part of their non-billable contribution to the firm. They don't aspire to leadership (if they did it would be suspect). They have no management training (but the need to manage is critical). They rotate in and out of management roles and consequently long term initiatives are difficult to execute. Committee membership changes, memories are short and individuals have the best of intentions to make a difference, come up short due to the pressures of their own practice.

Second, perhaps the goals were created by the leadership (an individual leader or a committee that forms the leadership team), not created by the individuals in the group. The leadership can set a direction for the firm and share a vision but professionals will have a better chance at success if they set their own goals.

Third, the goals may have been simply too big - they were not incremental and achievable. In the example above, one article, one speech and one client interview that actually gets accomplished is more powerful than aspiration without accomplishment.

What about the role of individuals? Setting personal and professional goals that are appropriate to your level keep you engaged. Achievement of those personal and professional goals gives you options. It is certainly easy to keep doing what you already do well but the challenge soon fades. In order to keep your career moving forward set some goals for the next three months that are achievable. Don't think in terms of aspiration think in terms of action. Here are some examples:

- I will raise my profile by... (write for X or speak at Y)
- To listen and learn from an existing client I will visit ...(Who)



- To enhance my relationship with others in the office I will ...(lunch with whom?)
- I will build my network of contacts by setting aside one hour per week to talk to people on the phone. (what hour on what day?)

By removing the words“ I should” from your vocabulary and embracing the phrase “I will”,

you will have upped your commitment to your own success, to your own career and by doing so to your group and your firm. You will also be able to support your colleagues who have taken on the often thankless job of leadership.

Karen MacKay is the founder and president of Phoenix Legal Inc. She can be reached at kmackay@phoenix-legal.com or by calling 416.657.2997

