



**LAWYER TO LAWYER MENTORING PROGRAM
WORKSHEET T
INTRODUCTION TO LAW OFFICE MANAGEMENT**

Worksheet T is intended to facilitate a discussion about the mentor's law office, how it is managed, and where to locate resources for learning more information about law office management issues.

* * *

- Take the new lawyer on a tour of the mentor's office, explaining how client files in mentor's office are managed and discussing the best practices for the following related issues:
 - Time records.
 - Records of client-related expenses.
 - Billing system.
 - Client retainer and/or payment schedules.
 - Fee agreements, including common fee agreements, the advantages and disadvantages to each, ethical considerations surrounding each, examples of improper provisions in fee agreements, and the importance of using engagement, non-engagement and disengagement letters.
 - Escrow and trust accounts, including establishing an IOLTA, the how-to's of accounting/auditing, use of interest proceeds, and proper procedures for handling funds and other property belonging to client.
 - Filing system, including procedures for opening and closing files, procedures for conflict checking, creating a checklist for new files, the importance of preparing a case memorandum and case plan, how to document the progress on cases, organizing both the file contents and the office filing system, and file inventory and review procedures.
 - Document retention plan.
 - Calendar and "tickler" or reminder system.
 - Information Technology Systems, including docketing software.
 - Methods of keeping clients informed about the progress of their matters.

- Discuss staff, equipment and other administrative issues in mentor's office, including the best practices for at least the following matters:
 - Mail distribution procedures.
 - Procedures for handling telephone calls, including when they should be returned.
 - Considerations in purchasing office furniture and where it can be purchased.
 - Library and research systems.



- Considerations in purchasing office equipment and the types which are essential and/or most helpful.
 - Other resources (publications, seminars, equipment, etc.) that a new lawyer might find particularly helpful in his or her work.
 - Personnel, including identifying employees who are needed to run the office efficiently and the benefits and disadvantages to hiring different types of employees (i.e., traditional, independent contractor, temporary).
 - Employee selection, including interviewing techniques, background investigations, extending offers, and maintaining personnel files.
 - Employment and discrimination laws of which an employer must be aware.
 - Supervising staff, handling employee discipline and preventing the unauthorized practice of law and the unethical practice by associates.
 - Considerations in purchasing insurance.
- Share with the new lawyer ethical and professional marketing techniques, effective rainmaking tools, and how to create a marketing plan for a firm.
- Review and discuss the suggestions made in the attached articles:
- Dan Pinnington & David Bilinsky, *Implement Appropriate Internal Controls*, LAW PRACTICE TODAY, April 2006.
 - Edward H. Flitton, *Law Firm Accounting for Dummies (Or How to Talk to New Lawyers about Money)*, LAW PRACTICE MAGAZINE, December 2005.
 - Allison C. Shields, *How to Take Control of Your Practice by Creating Vision and Mission Statements*, GP/SOLO LAW TRENDS & NEWS BUSINESS LAW, Feb. 2006.

RESOURCES

American Bar Association Law Practice Management Section

<http://www.abanet.org/lpm/home.shtml>

-A section of the ABA which provides helpful resources to its members about all aspects of law practice management.

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division E-Library

<http://www.abanet.org/yld/elibrary/home.html>

- Provides information about and materials from programs held at Young Lawyers Division Meetings and Conferences. Includes helpful outlines giving practical tips on how to practice law.



Association of Legal Administrators Legal Management Resource Center

<http://thesource.alanet.org/portal/server.pt>

-Provides online tools, forms and checklists and other valuable information about law practice management issues.

Columbus Bar Association Model Fee Agreement Forms

<http://www.cbalaw.org/formsdocuments/modelfeeagreements/index.php>

-Provides sample fee agreements for Ohio lawyers

MyShingle.com <http://www.myshingle.com/2008/01/resources/online-guide/>

-Provides links to on-line resources and manuals for starting your own law practice

Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation <http://www.olaf.org/>

-Provides the rules governing Ohio IOLTA/IOTA accounts and information about Ohio IOLTA/IOTA accounts.

Officekeeper – Ohio State Bar Association

<http://www.ohiobar.org/pub/?articleid=877>

- An on-line nuts and bolts resource guide to opening, maintaining and closing a law office, covering both the day-to-day operations of a law office, as well as professional responsibility. It includes checklists, forms, references and links to Web sites and the new Model Rules. (You must be an OSBA member to access.)

Unlock Your Potential <http://www.abanet.org/yld/publications/Unlockresourceguide.pdf>

-An American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division Members Service Project which is designed to aid young lawyers in determining whether they have chosen the right career path and offer resources and support to aid in starting a legal practice.

SPONSOR

What happens when a document becomes evidence?
Order your FREE Book *Electronic Evidence Management:
From Creation through Litigation.*

Brought to you by Fics

**ABA** LAW PRACTICE MANA
MARKETING • MANAGEMENT •

Law Practice TODAY

Finance

Implement Appropriate Internal Controls

by Dan Pinnington and David Bilinsky

April 2006

Ideally, your office should have clearly established internal controls for handling and documenting all types of financial transactions. These internal controls are really just policies and procedures that direct what steps should be taken when various financial transactions occur. Although a lack of internal controls does not necessarily constitute a breach of the professional conduct or ethics rules, you may consider implementing internal controls to assist your efforts to comply with them.

The following are some suggested internal controls you may consider implementing at your office:

Check requisitions

When dealing with check requisitions for both your general and trust accounts, consider the following:

- all check requests are accompanied by a signed check requisition evidencing approval;
- only certain designated lawyers may authorize trust account payments;
- only certain designated individuals may authorize general account payments;
- firm personnel responsible for preparing checks are instructed not to prepare checks unless the requisition includes a signature of approval;
- supporting documentation (such as an original invoice, reporting letter, statement of receipts or disbursements) accompanies the check requisition, where possible;
- original copy of the invoice is stamped paid (to prevent an individual from using an invoice more than once to obtain funds); and
- photocopies of invoices are not generally accepted as support for check requisitions.

Check signing policies

When dealing with check requisitions for both your general and trust accounts, consider the following:

- checks in excess of a threshold amount require the signatures of two partners;
- blank checks are never to be signed;
- checks made payable to financial institutions include details of the transaction;

- checks are in numbered order and the sequence is checked; and
- at least one of the individuals signing the checks always reviews the request for payment to determine if the request relates to trust funds and reviews the client file, to determine:
 - validity of the request for payment;
 - reasonableness of the amount requested;
 - if sufficient funds are available to pay the amount of the check; and
 - that an accounting to the client for receipts and disbursements is completed.

Trust records

Trust accounts are an essential part of the practice of law. When dealing with trust accounts and trust records consider the following suggestions:

- monthly reconciliations and adjustments are reviewed and signed by someone other than the individual who prepared the reconciliation,
- reviewer of the reconciliation ensures that:
 - reconciliations are prepared on time;
 - reconciled items are cleared promptly;
 - all unusual items are questioned and an adequate explanation is given for the unusual nature of the item and noted in the firm records and client file; and
 - a list of trust balances is periodically reviewed for closed or completed matters including trust balances that have not changed in the past twelve months; and
- Trust transfer requisitions are prepared to transfer funds from one client's trust ledger account to another trust ledger account, and:
 - written authorization from the client to transfer funds to another trust ledger is always obtained prior to the trust transfer;
 - the trust transfer requisition is signed by the responsible lawyer and an explanation is provided; and
 - the accounting department, or personnel responsible for accounting has been instructed to process trust transfer requisitions only if the criteria for signatures and explanations has been met;
- A senior partner or office manager periodically reviews the client's trust ledger accounts for unusual items; and
- Blank trust checks should be kept in a secure manner.

Clients' valuable property

Although it varies by area of practice, in many circumstances lawyers can find themselves taking custody of clients' valuable property. To ensure that this property is properly handled, consider taking the following steps:

- keep a proper inventory of valuable items held on behalf of the client(s); and
- make sure the physical existence of these items is periodically tested.

Staffing policies and procedures

Law firm staff are an essential part of getting all work done in a law office. The following are some suggested staffing policies that can operate as internal controls:

- the firm has a policy respecting an individual's need to take regular holidays;
- the firm conducts periodic reviews of lawyers' work;
- periodic reviews of client files are conducted by a senior partner or office manager to ensure:
 - the client receives an accounting for trust receipts and disbursements;
 - the details of the accounting to the client match with the trust ledger; and
 - the file is maintained in an orderly fashion; and
- lawyers are required to consider whether their outside interests may put them in a conflict of interest situation.

The firm should also be aware of indicators of potential problems which may result in inappropriate activities or conduct, including:

- a lawyer or staff member who is consistently too busy to take holidays;
- a lawyer or staff member who appears to be living beyond his or her means;
- sudden and significant increases in advances for entertainment expenditures;
- large increases in unbilled disbursements;
- a lawyer or staff member whose production has fallen off for no apparent reason;
- a lawyer or staff member who appears withdrawn or nervous; and
- a lawyer or staff member who continually makes last minute requests for funds.

Segregation of duties

Lawyers should segregate firm duties so that the same individual does not have complete control over the management of funds. Consider the following suggestions:

- the individual who opens the mail is different from the individual responsible for preparing a listing of all cash and checks received;
- all checks received are stamped "deposit only";
- the firm issues receipts for all cash or checks received to:
 - provide client with proof of payment; and
 - help prevent funds from being redirected to another client's account; and
- the numerical sequence of receipts is checked to ensure that all funds receipted are also recorded in accounting records and deposited in the bank.

Trust account don'ts

As a lawyer you are in a unique and special position of trust, and have been given the ability to use a very special tool, the client trust account. Mishandling client funds or misusing a trust account can have dire consequences – and it is the most common reason for disbarment. For this reason alone, you should be diligent about the use of your trust accounts.

Lawyers are not bankers

No matter what demands or pressures are placed on you, DO NOT use your trust account for any purpose that is not directly related to the practice of law, and don't simply run money through your account, as an escrow agent or otherwise. Doing so may raise a question as to whether or not you provided any legal services in connection with the monies that flowed in and out of the account. Activities that raise doubts about whether or not you provided legal services could result in a denial of coverage under your malpractice policy, leaving you potentially personally exposed to the full costs of the claim being made.

Don't commit or be a victim of fraud

As a lawyer you are in a unique position of trust. Moreover, your access to a trust account and your ability to assist in the completion of transactions, make you an especially attractive alternative to traditional financial institutions for those who prefer not to leave a traditional paper trail. You could be duped into moving money around in inappropriate, and sometimes illegal, ways. While handling matters you could find yourself in the commission to or a victim of a fraud. Beware!

[Back to Top](#)

This article was written by **Dan Pinnington** and **David J. Bilinsky**. It is an excerpt from the *Managing the Finances of Your Practice* booklet created as part of the practicePRO risk management initiative (www.practicepro.ca) by the Lawyers' Professional Indemnity Company (www.lawpro.ca). The full booklet is available at www.practicepro.ca/financesbooklet

[Current Issue](#) | [Article Archives](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Contribute](#) | [RSS/XML](#) | [Feedback](#)

© 2003-2006 American Bar Association -- [Copyright Statement](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)



American Bar Association

Member Login

[Home](#) | [JOIN](#) | [CLE](#) | [Lawyers](#) | [Education](#) | [Public](#) | [Store](#) | [Events](#) | [About](#) | [Contact](#)

Search LPM:

Search:

Web Site



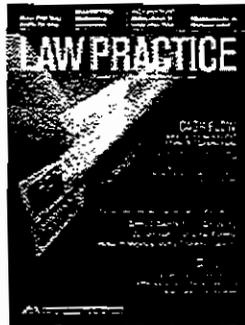
Advanced Search

Print



LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT SECTION

MARKETING • MANAGEMENT • TECHNOLOGY • FINANCE



LAW PRACTICE

THE BUSINESS OF PRACTICING LAW

- [Table of Contents](#)
- [Print This Article](#)
- [E-mail This Article](#)

LPM Home

Current Issue

Subscribe

Archived Issues

Write for Us

Advertise

About the

.Magazine

Order Back Issues

Masthead

Reprint Permission

Editorial Calendar

Contact Us

Law Firm Accounting for Dummies (Or How to Talk to New Lawyers about Money)

Young lawyers tend to measure their contribution to the firm on the basis of billable hours alone. But if your firm wants its associates to develop into profitable lawyers-and eventually partners and leaders of the firm-it's important that you teach them some basics of law firm finance from the get-go.

FROM: [DECEMBER 2005](#), PAGE 40 **BY:** [EDWARD H. FLITTON](#)

Start with a glossary of the accounting methods used by your firm, then explain the basics behind the statistics you use to measure their contribution. Over time, smart associates can learn to pick the practice groups, teams and partners they want to work with, so they can do their best at turning billable time into maximum revenues. You can use the following as a crib

sheet for mentoring associates in the ways of law firm dollars.

ESSENTIAL TERMINOLOGY

Partnership Accounting

Most law firms are organized as partnerships, either general or limited liability. A partnership does not pay taxes as an entity. Instead, all of a partnership's taxable income (revenues less expenses other than payments to partners) flows through to the partners, so that each partner has taxable income in the amount of his or her share of the firm's taxable income.

Because there are no taxes at the partnership level, even if the partnership retains income for its future needs, each partner must pay tax on his or her share of that income. For this reason, most law firms distribute all taxable income.

Each partner also must make a capital contribution upon admission to the firm, and there are occasional capital calls as well, which provides working capital for the firm. Since no earnings can be retained, the partnership must raise any further cash needs by borrowing.

Cash Basis of Accounting

Most businesses use the accrual method of accounting. However, law firms almost universally (at least in the United States) use the cash basis of accounting. Here is the primary difference in the law firm context: Using the accrual method, income is determined by the amount billed to clients. Using the cash basis, income is determined by the amount paid by clients. The reason that law firms use the cash basis is so that no more is distributed to the partners than has been received in cash. The accrual basis can lead to borrowing against receivables, a concept anathema to conservative lawyers.

The cash basis, however, does not provide an accurate measure of performance because it can be distorted by unusual patterns in client payments. For example, if a law firm has a very busy year in which it bills a great deal but is paid little, followed by a year in which work is down but the firm is paid more as a result of the past year's billings, the cash basis method would indicate that performance was better in the second year than in the first. A firm could thus appear to be on a rising curve when it is actually going down the tube.

Fortunately, law firms are generally alert to this distortion and rely on hours and billings, versus revenue, as the more reliable indicators of performance.

Receivables

Most partners are terrible about collecting receivables because they do not want to annoy their clients. But when receivables are paid slowly, the firm is basically acting as a bank to its clients. If the bills are paid more quickly, it lowers total outstanding receivables. If total receivables are too low, there is no source of cash available to pay the next month's expenses. So the pressure is to get the receivables paid quickly.

It is well established that the older the receivable is, the harder it is to collect. Most law firms categorize receivables by age, such as less-than-30-days old, 60-days old, 90-days old and so forth. The key is to keep the cash flowing.

Billable Hours and Realization Rates

Most fee arrangements continue to be based on the hours expended on the project. Therefore, each lawyer's financial contribution to the firm's income is usually measured by his or her billable hours. This creates an inventory of unbilled time, which is in turn billed out to become receivables, which—one hopes—are paid to produce those beloved revenues.

However, there are two other factors in the calculation: billing rates and realization rates. The income being generated by any lawyer is calculated by the product of hours, billing rates and realization rates. Very few lawyers are paid 100 percent on time billed, and realization rates gauge that adjustment. Most law firm accounting systems track three kinds of realization rates:

- **Standard realization.** This tracks adjustments of billing rates when the file is first opened—that is, when special deals regarding billing rates are made with a client at the start of the engagement.
- **Billing realization.** This measures adjustments made at the time of billing—that is, when the partner reviews all hours charged to a particular matter and makes decisions to modify the totals in some cases.
- **Collection realization.** This tracks adjustments made after the bill is rendered, either because a client is unwilling or is unable to pay the entire amount of the bill.

ADVICE FOR ASSOCIATES: CREATING STRONG EVALUATION STATISTICS

Once associates are familiar with the preceding financial principles, it becomes easier for them to see that there is more to profitability than simply accumulating hours. You can now discuss with them their billing rate and how, for example, it can be increased by developing a unique specialty, as well as how the lawyer's realization rate is affected by efficiency and the choice of strong and sophisticated clients.

Many firms, in fact, measure lawyers' contributions by their "revenue received"—which means the dollars of revenue associated with the work the lawyer performs. (The precise term varies from firm to firm.) This measure brings the variables of billing rates, realization rates and actual payment of the bill into the equation.

Of course, if billable hours are all that matter in your firm, you can just tell everyone to rack up

the hours in the safe knowledge that they are in a financially unsophisticated firm. But if the revenue received concept is being used, or if realization and billing rates are otherwise considered, advise associates that measuring their personal contributions will depend on the following factors:

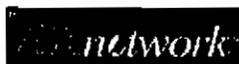
- **Efficiency.** It doesn't help to spend lots of hours if the billing partner will have to write them off. (In fact, this can really hurt a young lawyer's reputation with that partner.)
- **Billing rates.** Most firms set standard billing rates for each class of associates. But some associates develop sufficient expertise or experience that a higher rate can be charged for their time. Associates who feel they have such expertise should argue for a higher rate.
- **Strong, sophisticated clients.** Weak, unsophisticated clients typically complain about the amount of the bill, leading to write-offs, which affect the realization rates of all who worked on the case. Almost invariably, such clients also want the bill discounted because of financial difficulties, which has the same effect.
- **Billing arrangements.** Some larger clients negotiate discounts, which affect revenue received and realization rates. Payments are sometimes deferred by agreement in advance. Working on contingent-fee cases can result in a long delay in receiving the revenues, although a successful result can produce high realization rates and revenue received. A loss can have the opposite effect.

Of course, it is the partners who control many of these variables. So it isn't easy for young associates to freely pick and choose their cases with these factors in mind. Over time, though, smart associates can gain the knowledge, freedom and authority to make the kinds of choices that maximize revenues. The firm's job is to help them understand the ins and outs of the systems that will get them there.

Edward H. Flitton (eflitton@hollandhart.com) is Managing Partner of the Colorado law firm Holland & Hart and a member of the Law Practice Editorial Advisory Board.

[ABA Copyright Statement](#) [ABA Privacy Statement](#)

copyright American Bar Association



[CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO PREVIOUS PAGE](#)

GP Solo Law Trends & News

Business Law

February 2006

Volume 2, Number 2

Table of Contents

How to Take Control of Your Practice by Creating Vision and Mission Statements

By Allison C. Shields

Many solos and lawyers responsible for managing their firms report feeling out of control or overwhelmed. Even successful lawyers will admit that their practices grew almost by chance, rather than by design. They don't have a handle on how their clients are coming to them, or what their clients are really looking for. They aren't sure how to grow their practice, to take it in a new direction, to get better work or better clients. They never sat down and thought about exactly what they wanted their practice to be, but they tell me their practice isn't what they want it to be.

There is hope. Stop to take stock of where you are and where you want your practice to be in the future. After all, if you don't know where you're going, how are you going to get there?

The first step toward creating the practice that you want is by establishing the vision and mission, writing them down, and sharing them with everyone that works in your firm so that they are inspired by them.

The vision and mission statements are the touchstone for everything you undertake, from strategic planning, marketing, management and practice building to recruitment, hiring and performance evaluations. These two statements are important, concrete guides for the future of your practice. Once the vision and mission are written and digested, the rest of your business activities, including the management and marketing of your practice, have a direction.

With a mission statement, you have a guiding principle against which to measure each of its actions. You can begin to craft your practice in a more purposeful way and create business plans which will bring the firm to its destination – the attainment of the firm's vision.

What is a 'vision?'

The vision is the statement of what you are building. It describes the idea of your firm in a way that captures your passion for your business and inspires you. It is the picture of what the firm wants to be in three to five years. Although some advocate creating a vision with a much longer time-frame, with the pace of business today and the changing legal landscape, creating a shorter term vision can keep you inspired and won't become obsolete before it is reached.

The vision should be specific and include items such as culture, the 'feel' and atmosphere of the firm, the intangibles that customers can expect, as well as the 'harder' or more tangible aspects of the business, such as number of clients, gross profits, number of employees, number of offices, number and types of practice areas, etc.

Crafting Your Vision Statement

The vision describes your dream for your practice. Set no limits when initially exploring the vision statement – let yourself describe your vision in an expanded manner. It may help you see possibilities you might not otherwise have recognized. Spend some time thinking about it before editing down to what you think is realistic or achievable. But remember when editing not to edit out your passion – that which makes you enthusiastic about reaching your vision.

Questions to Consider When Creating a Vision Statement

- Who is your ideal client?
- What are your financial goals for your practice?
- What will you or your firm be known for?
- What services will you provide your clients?
- What will your role be in the practice?
- Where do you practice?
- When will you need more space, different systems, more staff, more attorneys?
- Why are you practicing law?
- Why will your clients hire you rather than your competition?
- What will the culture of your practice be?
- What are your beliefs and values and how will they affect your practice?

What is a mission statement?

The mission statement describes the firm's current purpose, identifies the firm's market, values and priorities. It illustrates how the firm intends to achieve its vision and how it goes about the practice of law every day. It answers the question why clients will hire you to represent them.

Spending the time creating the mission statement and obtaining input from others in the firm enhances 'buy in' from the firm, regardless of its size, and establishes a starting point for the firm's forward progress.

Your mission statement will also be useful for your clients – it will convey to clients and potential clients the essence of your firm and the manner in which you do business. The mission statement can be a powerful tool, both for strengthening the infrastructure of your business, and for attracting and keeping the clients you want.

Crafting Your Mission Statement

The three keys to a mission statement are purpose, business and values.

Purpose

What is the firm's core purpose? Your response to this question should be a concrete one, and it is truly the foundation of your whole practice, and especially your management and marketing plans. Spend some time thinking about why your firm was created, what need it seeks to fill. Why are you practicing law? What do you hope to accomplish? What are you committed to providing to your clients?

The purpose section of the mission statement should also provide some information about the firm's basic management philosophy and 'in-house' style – does the firm want to be a small, boutique law firm, a large business, a family atmosphere, corporate atmosphere, etc.

Business

Your mission statement should also address the business of the firm – the firm's clients, practice areas and services provided. Keep in mind that if your firm has multiple practice areas, it might make sense to keep your overall firm mission

statement more general and craft separate mission statements for the different practice areas.

Do you have or do you want to develop a niche practice? Who are the beneficiaries of your work? Who is your ideal client? What are their demographics? What are their problems or needs? What services do you provide to address those needs?

Values

The values expressed in your mission statement emphasize what you are aiming for, what the firm's core priorities are - does the firm emphasize responsiveness over completeness? Do you emphasize alternative dispute resolution over litigation? Do you emphasize compassion versus aggression? What is most important to the firm, and how do you want to be known?

Set Yourself Apart

To be effective, the mission statement should be unique to you and your practice and reflect your personality.

The problem with many law firm mission statements currently in existence is the same problem lawyers frequently have with their marketing - rather than focusing on who the target audience is, and what their problems are, the focus is only on the firm or lawyer - their education, their skills, etc. The mission statement, just like a good marketing message, must focus on the client - what their problems are, and how your firm solves their problems or meets their needs better or in a different way than your competition does. It's not about you, it's about them, and about being of service to them.

If you substitute the name any other law firm or lawyer that practices in your area of law in your mission statement, is it still true? If it is, your mission statement is too vague.

For example, " To provide quality legal services and practical, effective solutions to individuals and businesses at a fair cost with a focus on client satisfaction " is an ineffective and uninspiring mission statement. It doesn't convey a sense of the firm's uniqueness or culture. It doesn't communicate the kind of services the firm provides, to whom they are provided, or how. This mission statement sets forth the bare the minimum level of service which all clients expect their lawyers to provide - effective solutions at a fair price.

Tips for Writing Vision and Mission Statements

- Be specific, but make sure that the mission statement doesn't become a strategic plan. The mission statement should be an enduring statement of the firm's identity, and should not contain goals and objectives. The specific goals, objectives and actions to be taken by the firm should be incorporated into a plan, but that should be separate from the mission statement.
- Use 'we' to emphasize the firm as a whole, and focus on the firm's culture and strategies.
- Make sure all of your employees can relate to the mission statement - that it inspires all employees to be their best and to work toward a common goal.
- Make it easy to understand - don't use 'lawyer-speak.' Remember, many of your employees are not lawyers, and most (if not all) of your clients are non-lawyers!

- A good mission statement fosters commitment, motivation, and inspiration.
- Seek input from all levels of the organization – from the file clerks, receptionists, secretaries, attorneys, paralegals, etc. This creates 'buy in' for everyone at the firm, makes them feel a part of the team, and provides different perspectives.
- After input is received, the mission statement can be written by an individual or a small committee composed of individuals sensitive to the entire firm's viewpoints, and it should reflect areas of consensus. But do not allow a large group to be involved in the actual writing of the vision and mission statements, as this approach often devolves into nitpicking about comma placement, etc. and accomplishes nothing.
- Set a deadline for completing the mission statement.
- Circulate a draft of the mission statement before it is finalized for review and comment.
- When reviewing the draft, ask yourself: Does this accurately reflect my understanding of the firm and its business? Can the partnership live up to this? Can the individual attorneys live up to it? Can our staff live up to it? Can we operate by this on a daily basis? Are we willing to measure everything the firm does by this?

A Final Word About Implementation

Writing vision and mission statements alone will not bring about change or reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed. To be effective, implementation is essential. Everything in the practice must be based upon and measured against the mission statement. If a client, a project, a charity event, a case, or a method of practicing is not in alignment with the firm's mission statement, the firm risks diluting the firm's identity and power.

Just as any good trial lawyer knows not to make promises in her opening statement that she can't keep, so every law firm should beware of crafting a mission statement which the firm is not prepared to act upon and enforce. Don't create expectations that you can't or won't live up to. If you don't believe your mission statement, why should your client? If the partnership doesn't believe it, why should your associates and staff?

In order to create effective and inspiring vision and mission statements, it is crucial to ensure that the firm leaders are in agreement. Do they all agree with the vision? Do the partners agree on the direction of the firm, the types of clients the firm does and will represent, and the manner in which the clients are serviced? Can all partners articulate and agree upon what sets your firm apart from the competition?

If you want to create a direction for the future of your practice, and a way of doing business that inspires you, your entire firm, and your clients, creating vision and mission statements are a good place to start. Once you have a clear direction, making real progress toward your goals is much easier, and reduces that feeling of being overwhelmed.

Allison C. Shields, a former practicing attorney, helps solo practitioners and law firms reach their maximum potential by providing practice management and marketing strategies through coaching and consulting. You can learn more by visiting her blog at www.legaleaseconsulting.com.

© The
American Bar
Association. All
rights
reserved. ABA
Privacy
Statement
02/08/2006
07:34 AM