Cultivating your firm's culture

In the business world, branding is the current trend. It's everywhere you look. Consulting companies want to teach you how to brand. Advertisers want to present your brand and clients (hopefully) want to identify with your brand. While your firm's brand is the external image that your law practice presents to the world, culture is the internal image of your firm.

In an American Bar Association article, legal marketer Kevin Chern defined firm culture as "a set of shared attitudes, behaviors, values, goals, practices and attributes that characterize an institution, organization or group." It's important to establish your firm's culture from the start, so subsequent management and human resource decisions align with the overall goals of the practice.

Why is culture important?

Every law practice has a culture, whether you intend to establish one or not. If you fail to take an active role in defining it, you may end up with a culture that doesn't align with your goals. Even worse, your firm may develop attitudes and behaviors that are unprofessional, unethical and dangerous to the well-being of your practice.

Culture doesn't stop at the walls of your firm's building. It follows your attorneys in every professional move they make. Think about this. Every town has at least one law firm with a questionable reputation. The attorneys may be known to provide poor client service, or they may have a record of poor performance in the courtroom. These public perceptions are a reflection of the firm's internal culture.

Establishing your firm's culture

When devloping your firm's culture, it is important to start with the big picture and work backwards. First, consider the goals that you have set for

your practice. Are you planning to be one of the top litigation firms in the state or are you more interested in becoming your community's go-to domestic relations firm? Once you see the big picture, it is easier to determine what pieces are necessary to achieve it. Here are some examples:

- A small practice can result in close working relationships. In this type of environment, the personalities of your attorneys can prove just as important as their legal skills. As you make hiring decisions, you want to ensure that the demeanor and work ethic of each addition fits with your desired firm culture.
- If you are dedicated to advancing diversity and the rights or all people, shouldn't the genders, races, and ethnicities of your firm partners and associates reflect these values?
- Do you want a firm where members have time to take part in family activities? Extensive billable hour requirements are probably not the best option for advancing this goal.

Many factors go into creating a firm's culture. As you go about opening your law practice, culture may not be at the top of your list, but ignoring it can negatively affect your firm's reputation and overall success.

About Erika Winston:

Erika Winston is a Virginia based writer with a passion for all things legal. As a former domestic relations attorney, she understands the challenge of determining the best fee structure for your practice. Erika is a regular contributor to TimeSolv and a variety of other publications.