



Reinvigorating Practices

The current economic environment has resulted in many practices suffering from inertia. Partners lack the motivating sense of achievement and progress to which they had become accustomed and find it hard to shake off a feeling of malaise. The status quo is perceived to be both unsatisfactory and reassuringly familiar and change is seen to be difficult and risky.

This inactivity is particularly unfortunate since a practice's progress in a flat market depends more than ever upon internal change and improvements in performance and competitiveness: A buoyant market is not going to raise the practice and it is up to the partners to do it for themselves.

At the same time many practices are clear about their direction. The practice is, more or less, on the right path, partners know well where they are going, but 'more of the same' lacks the inspirational punch necessary to encourage action.

We have worked with a number of Practice Heads to help them to revive a sense of purpose in their partners and to stimulate the hunger for change which has enabled them to make dramatic progress. While the nature of practices and the challenges they face may differ, our experience suggests a number of steps that are fundamental to reinvigorating partners and re-establishing a motivating sense of direction.

1. Paint a clear picture of recent history and performance

There is a natural predisposition to under-appreciate past achievements and to ignore past weaknesses. Building motivation is greatly helped if partners consider what the practice has achieved and how it has progressed over recent years. The flip-side of this is that partners also tend to turn a blind eye to the practice's weaknesses and, particularly, its progress relative to competitors. A useful starting point for the reinvigorating process is to identify how the practice has progressed in both absolute and relative terms, to both highlight the advances that have been made but also the progress of competitors.

2. Review the current state and development of the market for services

The market is often used as an excuse for under-performance but rarely credited for good results. Developing a more balanced view which identifies the challenges and opportunities that the changing market presents and how the practice will position itself so as to benefit from these developments is crucial. Strong practices can sink in lousy markets and weak practices can succeed despite themselves in booming markets. Being clear about the way in which the markets for different practices and sectors are developing and the key attributes needed to succeed in these markets provides a significant incentive for partners to change.

3. Reaffirm the practice's aims but modify them as necessary to reflect the realities of the changed market

The practice's strategy needs to be presented within the context of these first two points. The reasons for change and development supported by the 'hope' provided by the practice's progress to date and emerging market opportunities and the 'fear' of competitor and market developments. By explaining the developing context within

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which the practice works, and grounding the rationale for the strategy in this way, innovation and change come to be seen as natural and necessary.

The framing should be such that the majority comes to view change as necessary and partners expect each other to make a contribution to the success of the strategy. In our experience change is most often blocked not by the disruptive actions of a vocal minority but by the passive noncompliance of the majority. Partners retreating into their own work and sticking to the status quo need to be seen by the wider partnership as being passively aggressive and obstructive rather than demonstrating a reasonable response to the challenges the practice faces. Peer pressure is vital and providing a clear and succinct message supported by good evidence and reasoning is fundamental to building majority acceptance and the momentum for change within the partnership.

4. Identify a small number of significant initiatives

In many cases the significant developments required within the practice will not be huge and revolutionary. Much of what makes a successful practice is undramatic and uninspiring. Partners need to be persuaded of the importance of these things and supporting them with a clear rationale is as important for the small as for the big and innovative initiatives. Including a number of small and relatively easily achieved objectives also ensures that some measurable progress will be made and early momentum will be built.

As part of this process it is also helpful if a number of different measures of success are identified. To emphasize a single financial measure, a measure of size, or of client satisfaction, is to become a hostage to fortune and encourages a restricted view of the development of the practice. A small number of measures covering various different aspects of the practice's progress is worth introducing so that upon review the following year and thereafter there is a rounded discussion and appreciation of progress.

5. Delegate and engage

If one commands partners to change typically they will cling, barnacle-like, to the status quo. Authoritarian direction is rarely effective and it is better not to tell partners what to do but to present a number of options and then to ask for their assistance in moving the practice in the direction agreed. This requires both involving partners in defining and agreeing the direction of travel – consulting them widely and discussing the options with them openly – and then delegating the responsibility for leading the various initiatives to a number of partners. Delegation of elements of the strategy ensures that these partners feel in control of the process and also reduces the load on the Practice Head.

The aim should be to preserve individual accountability for the success or failure of an initiative while ensuring the wide involvement of partners in the practice's development. Our clients find that this process of delegation and the devolution of responsibility, so individual partners feel both empowered and obliged to make a contribution to the practice, can be highly effective.

Most practices do not require a revolution so much as concerted collective effort to progress. Partners will rediscover their drive and ambition if they: Agree upon the realities of the current position and the markets in which the practice operates; can be sure that the practice is moving in a direction that will assist them in realizing their professional ambitions; are clear about the actions required to make progress; and, believe that the majority of their fellow partners will make a positive contribution to the practice's development.

Lawyers in general, and partners in particular, are ambitious people. Careful preparation and a spark of leadership can reignite their ambition. Innovation and change become not just acceptable but desirable and progress becomes self-reinforcing.

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