

Finding consensus

HOW TO SET A COMPANY VISION

Interviewed by CAROLYN LAWELL

The best business advice Michael E. Zatezalo ever received didn't come from a lawyer colleague or a mentor in his field. It came from his father, a steel industry manager, who taught him no matter how many degrees you have or how smart you are, 75 percent of everything you do is the ability to get along with people.

Zatezalo references that message when trying to hone his listening skills or understand his 130 employees' points of view.

To build employee consensus you have to be a good



listener, says the managing director of law firm Kegler, Brown, Hill & Ritter Co. LPA. He uses consensus building while setting a company vision and, more specifically, communicating that vision to employees.

"That's a challenge in law firms because law firms are basically horizontal organizations and people in law firms have a fair amount of autonomy," Zatezalo says.

Smart Business spoke with Zatezalo about how to set a vision and push it through the organization.

Involve key people in developing a plan. In a law firm, you have to talk to your partners and lawyers, you have to study what's going on in the marketplace, you have to analyze your strengths, weaknesses and your challenges, and out of that, [you] develop your vision and your plan.

We involve usually the executive committee — the executive committee really is the leadership group in our law firm — and we also from time to time have consultants that we use to help us facilitate our development of strategic direction.

What you normally do is you develop your vision over time. For example, every year, we have a firm retreat where all the attorneys participate. We usually have a facilitator or a consultant come in who speaks on various topics. But if you're talking about developing a plan, normally what you do is you talk to the heads of all the practice areas, gather information (on market trends), and you sit down with the heads and say, 'What are you going to need this year, where do you envision your practice going, are you adequately staffed, do you have enough support, do you need any new technology, those types of things?'

You basically talk to all of your different practice areas, and then based on information that you're gathering on legal trends, say, 'Are there areas we need to get into or industries that we should be focusing on?' and you develop your plan from that.

Also I think one of the important things, try to match what you're doing with what people love to do. So, for example, if you're trying to develop an international practice, you have to have a lawyer who is really passionate about international practice or international law. You have to have someone that is really passionate about that area to really make it a success.

For example, we have an expanding India practice. The

head of our international area basically said this is a good opportunity, and we started gathering information several years ago about what was going on there, and we also have an attorney here who is dual licensed in India and the U.S. We said this is a good opportunity to develop because we have the expertise, we have a person who is dual licensed in it, it's an expanding market.

Push the vision through to employees. You have to do that by building consensus and convincing your partners that you're trying to help them succeed by helping them succeed and the firm succeed.

It's communication. But you also have to be a good listener. And I guess overall it's basically trying to help someone succeed. If you can demonstrate

One of the things we've done is created what we call a Wow Committee, which meets and is made up of secretaries, administrative staff, directors ... there's a mix of us that meet every month. The purpose of the Wow Committee is how can we provide such outstanding client service our clients say 'wow.' We go through the client experience with our firm and analyze each step, basically say how can we improve that. I think that committee has helped us all communicate much better in terms of how to treat clients and how to treat one another.

Monitor whether or not employees understand the vision. You measure by: Are we increasing our fees in that area, are we increasing our clients, are we developing a reputation, are we becoming known as the go-to

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that you're trying to help someone succeed, you can get that consensus.

(You demonstrate that) by being a good listener, asking questions, coming up with ideas to improve an individual's practice or practice area, giving them the resources to succeed, supporting their efforts.

I think it's every day you have to remind everyone of what we're trying to do.

I personally think that ... you communicate by personal communication, one-on-one or personally talking to people, and also being consistent in your message. When you don't change your story, you're communicating with people.

You have to have one message and everybody in the firm understand their role. I believe in the team concept so that everybody is a link in the chain.

firm for that particular area, how many people have we hired, [and] are we getting a lot of inquiries from people who want to work for us because of that area?

Ultimately, the test of whether the message is getting out is whether they've been able to expand the business and generate enough work for their area, that's the final test.

The question is a hard one in a law firm because we're not a vertical company, so it's not like we can do all of these quantitative tests. We're not an IBM, you don't have middle managers and then go on down. We're kind of a horizontal business. For example, if you have a practice area that is growing and they add two more associates and you recruit two more lateral attorneys, then you know it's working. <<

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