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Effective Teamwork Strategies for Law Firms

Summary: Learn the four stages of group development, how each stage applies to groups in law firms, and how to develop effective teamwork strategies in law firms.

Effective teamwork is critical to law firms. Increasingly, clients expect firms to work effectively across departments, offices, and even jurisdictions. The greater complexity and size of legal matters requires more frequent collaboration and sharing of resources. Firms themselves have evolved from loose collections of individuals to a more unified structure. They have grown so much that they need groups of lawyers to run management teams, compensation committees, and client and industry teams.

But at many firms, teams detract from performance. We believe that is because too few team leaders and members sufficiently understand how groups work. A team's success depends on the constructive engagement of its members. But lawyers often retreat from teamwork and revert to solitary productivity when the behavior of the other members seems confusing and destructive, objectives and roles are not clear, and progress is minimal. By understanding the way that groups operate, lawyers can both lead and effectively contribute to the groups in which they work.

Many firms that have successfully built and managed teams provide their lawyers with training and support in teamwork. Such firms recognize that effective teamwork doesn't just happen by chance. Rather, it is a skill that can be taught. By increasing the effectiveness of their teams, these firms have freed lawyers from unproductive meetings to focus on client work. This, in turn, improves the firm's productivity and, ultimately, profitability.

See the following articles for more information:

- **Law Firm Profit Components**
- **Capitalizing on a Law Firm's Growth—Is Bigger Better?**



Research in the field of group dynamics has produced psychological frameworks for understanding teams. The most established conceptual model is one proposed by organizational psychologist Bruce Tuckman in 1965. Dr. Susan Wheelan, a professor of psychology at Temple University, has undertaken more recent research into the stages of group development. We have drawn from both models and applied them to law firms.

The research shows that groups develop through a series of stages. These include the following: forming, where the key issues are dependency and inclusion; storming, where the issues are ‘counterdependency’ and conflict; norming, where the issues are trust, goal-setting, and structure; and performing, where they are maximizing work and productivity. The model is a simplification. In reality, groups do not fall cleanly into one stage or another. But understanding these stages can help lawyers improve their performance in practice groups, client teams, and committees. Here is a brief look at each:

Stage 1: Forming. Anytime a group of people come together for the first time, they generally behave in a tentative and polite way. This is because group members face psychological issues that must be resolved before they can turn their full attention to the actual tasks of the group. They are unsure about their roles and worried about such questions as: ‘Is it safe to speak my mind in this group?’ ‘Does the leader know what he or she is doing?’ ‘What do I have to do to be a part of this group?’ and ‘Will anything worthwhile result if I invest my time here?’

The more uncertain group members are about these kinds of psychological issues, the more they are distracted from the team’s actual work. Thus, early in the life of a group, the leader needs to reduce uncertainty by being clear, structured, and direct. Often, lawyers who are appointed to lead new groups do exactly the opposite. Out of respect for their colleagues, they start with a highly consensual approach. They ask group members what they want to focus on and ignore requests for clarification. This behavior merely increases psychological uncertainty and prolongs this relatively inefficient stage in the group’s development.



During this stage, most group members give up some of their autonomy and individuality in order to be accepted as a member of the group. But as members' comfort in the group increases, their need for autonomy reasserts itself (particularly with lawyers). Group members begin stating their viewpoints more assertively, and differences begin to emerge among group members, often around goals for the group. To strengthen their causes, members of a group often seek out like-minded allies who share their viewpoint. In this fashion, factions begin to form. This generally signals a group's transition to the second stage, storming.

Stage 2: Storming. Members of a group that has newly entered the storming stage will devote an increasing amount of energy to staking out positions, testing to see if they can maintain their individual autonomy and still work together, and slipping into conflict with each other and the leader. While it may seem counterintuitive, the emergence of conflict in Stage 2 groups actually serves a positive purpose. Effective, cohesive, and lasting groups are those in which members have a high level of trust and respect for each other, and in which disagreements can be settled without acrimony. This must be learned from experience.

In addition to factional conflict, there is also usually increased criticism of and other forms of attacks on the leader during Stage 2. Some 'dependent' group members take the leader's side and defend him or her, and some 'counterdependent' group members typically join in the attack. If you are the leader of a group during this stage, it's helpful to know that the attack is probably not against you personally, but against you in your role of leader. If you realize this, you can more easily deflect the attack and guide group members into accepting their differences and agreeing to disagree. Less experienced lawyers get defensive, take it personally, and even start attacking the critics. This only exacerbates the situation and prolongs this stage of the process.

Groups typically find the tension and conflict of Stage 2 to be awkward and uncomfortable. This discomfort propels them to resolve their conflicts, thus moving them into the next stage, norming.



Stage 3: Norming. This is a more mature stage, during which three fundamental transformations take place. First, the members of the group begin to build a higher level of mutual trust. (They are aided in this task by having resolved the conflict of Stage 2.) Second, supported by the increasing trust, the members revisit and refine the group's goals (See '[Finding Goals That Work](#)' below). And third, the members agree upon a division of labor and identify clear roles. Since trust is high, members are unconcerned when even important tasks are delegated to other members or a subgroup.

In a law firm, however, groups of lawyers are frequently so used to adversarial behavior that the conflict of Stage 2 does not seem uncomfortable or out of place, and there is insufficient discomfort to motivate them to move out of Stage 2 and into Stage 3. We often find lawyers stuck in Stage 2, devoting large amounts of energy to preserving fiefdoms, bickering, and attacking group leaders. The lack of trust means that work is not delegated, and goals are not agreed upon.

Reaching Stage 3 is particularly critical in law firms because it is at this point that delegation becomes effective. Until trust is built, lawyers spend their time in unnecessary meetings to ensure that their interests are protected. Once trust is established, the group operates more efficiently and consumes less of everybody's time. Lawyers are freed up to do billable work rather than sit in internal meetings.

Stage 4: Performing. With trust established, and roles and goals redefined and agreed upon, the group can focus its energy on its work. This marks the group's entry into the highly productive performing stage. As long as its membership remains constant, the group will work relatively smoothly towards its objectives. However, significant changes in team composition can cause the team to regress to an earlier stage, as the new dynamics are worked through.

Generally, there are six critical points to remember about how this model works:

- Groups develop through stages. It is not possible to shortcut the stages.



- At each stage, team leaders and team members have different roles to play.
- High-performing teams spend about 75 percent of their time on accomplishing their task and 25 percent on the process - that is, fostering behaviors that maintain group relations.
- When establishing a group, the leader should reduce anxiety and uncertainty by providing clear direction. Seeking consensus too early on will be counterproductive.
- Conflict is a healthy and inevitable component of group development. Challenges should not be taken personally, but the group must move beyond them and not become stuck in this stage, as lawyers are prone to do.
- The financial payoff comes once mutual trust has been established. The extra billable time that becomes available can add up to significant increased revenue.

The skills for operating effectively within groups are not innate, and teams are most effective when members and leaders understand group dynamics. Most professionals benefit from some guidance and training in this area. Only through understanding and actively managing teamwork can firms harness the potential synergy of collective action and produce a more satisfying and profitable workplace.

Finding Goals That Work

Goals that drive teamwork tend to have three important characteristics:

- First, they require collective action. This means that they target outcomes that no one could achieve on his or her own. Goals that require acting in concert tend to mobilize people. For instance, a goal that calls for every partner in a practice group to increase billings by 10 percent is not one that requires collective action. Each partner can work on his or her own cases and contribute to the goal without ever exhibiting team behavior. By contrast, a goal that calls for a team to put together a complex educational or social event for 200 members of a client company demands teamwork and collaboration. It's more than one person can accomplish.



- Second, the goals should be meaningful (and even inspiring). Goals that touch people's passions are far more powerful and likely to mobilize than cerebral goals that make logical sense but don't inspire. The most effective teams have an emotional commitment to the team's goal, just like athletes do. In law firms, effective goals often build on lawyers' desire to develop their professional reputations, to increase their public standing or that of the firm, and to work to the highest professional standards. Framing goals in terms of what is important to individual team members is vital if they are to commit emotionally to the group's success.
- Third, the goals should have a specific, measurable outcome. There's even a mnemonic device for it - 'smart.' Goals should be:
 - SPECIFIC - There should be a well-defined objective.
 - MEASURABLE - The achievement of the objective should be verifiable.
 - ATTAINABLE - The goal should present a challenge but be feasible, given effective collaboration and team effort.
 - RELEVANT - The goal should fit within the firm's plans and strategy.
 - TIME-CONSTRAINED - There should be a deadline, because building team motivation and momentum for ongoing goals is extremely difficult.

Developing goals that meet these criteria is not easy, but the effort will help build teamwork and create cohesion.

See the following articles for more information:

- **You Need to Have Desire to Achieve Your Goals**
- **Never Stop Improving**

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