

5 Tips to Be a Better, Happier Firm: A New Year's Resolution

By [LawVision](#) on December 22, 2015

For many, year-end is a time of reflection. A time for self-assessment, an opportunity to shed bad habits or embrace new ones. As we look ahead to 2016, what is it that we, as a profession, can do better?

Gallup recently announced the results of their regular survey on employee engagement. For at least the sixth year in a row, employee engagement among US workers hovers at just over 30%. More than just a feel-good notion, employee engagement has been linked not only to greater productivity and higher job satisfaction but also to higher overall profitability. Organizational units with employee engagement ratings in the top quartile enjoy [profits that are 22% higher](#) than those with bottom quartile ratings.

Meanwhile, at law firms, the levels of anxiety and depression continue to climb. Burn-out is common and [depression rates are 3.6 times higher](#) than the general population. While Bruce McEwan's aptly named "hollow middle" is partly the result of demographics, many law firms are also experiencing an exodus of high-quality talent in their 30's and 40's – a trend that (when combined with sharp declines in law school applications) signals a pending war for talent.

"As we look ahead to 2016, let's ask ourselves: what can we, as a profession, do better?"

Behind these challenges – employee engagement, anxiety levels, job satisfaction – is one of the more powerful contributors to an individual's professional experience: [culture](#). Even while law firms embrace or even downright exalt the virtues of their culture, the industry is experiencing high rates of turnover, an active lateral market, climbing since 2010, and, as referenced in Bloomberg's recent article, high levels of workplace stress. These facts are incongruous; and while we have measures to demonstrate the latter, the former is more likely rooted in a false sense of optimism and what psychologists refer to as confirmation bias (i.e., we want to believe that what we have created or chosen conforms with our preconceptions).

Fortunately, the power to influence these outcomes is within our control. Cultural transformation – a process that a) typically begins at the top; and b) requires a conscious, dedicated investment in improvement across multiple dimensions – can help to alleviate pressure, improve working conditions and drive more consistent, high-levels of performance. Research shows that so-called "Constructive cultures," those characterized by beliefs such as achievement, self-actualization and empathy, have higher degrees of employee engagement and job satisfaction and lower levels of stress than other cultural types. It also shows that these cultures exhibit a higher propensity for other characteristics, including those that form the basis of our five tips for building a better, happier law firm in 2016:

1. **Clarify goals and expectations** for each individual member of the firm – All too often, written standards for "what it takes to make partner" differ considerably from those that prospective partners perceive or experience. Further, criteria or expectations often get muddled as exceptions are made at various levels (most frequently for equity partners). Commit to having the difficult conversations this year, weeding out (or refocusing) the unproductive partners, and establishing – and applying – a consistent set of expectations for each role within the firm.
2. **Remove barriers to collaboration** – Collaboration does not need to be limited to sales alone. Working in small teams across the firm on efforts as diverse as "recruiting the next generation," "building a stronger brand," "improving firm diversity;" or "transforming our culture" can create bonds and help to infuse a sense of teamwork,

involvement and interdependence. In 2016, develop formal task forces to tackle some of the firm's hot topics or long-term objectives.

3. **Communicate a well-defined strategy** and vision – Perhaps nothing is more demotivating to a driven, overachieving lawyer than poor guidance and direction. The absence of strategic goals sets the firm – and the individuals within it – up for failure. Joint goal-setting, regular communication upwards and downwards and a clearly articulated mission are hallmarks of stronger, constructive cultures. If your firm's strategic plan dates back to 2010 (or earlier); if you haven't updated your strategic goals within the past year; or if you haven't communicated them within the past 3 months, it is time to brush off the dust and invest in some serious effort in 2016.
4. **Never stop learning**, or teaching – Constructive cultures embrace the idea of continuous improvement. Virtually all law firms invest (some more heavily than others) in professional development with a program emphasis on CLE, project management and business development. Make 2016 the year to expand beyond the traditional and offer a more varied suite of learning opportunities. Give attorneys the tools they need to run a business – lessons in leadership, strategy, business principles and innovation will help them take the long view while simultaneously triggering positive cultural change.
5. **Stop tolerating bad behavior** – Most law firms we work with affectionately refer to this as the “no *sshole rule” and most profess to have it. Unfortunately, not all firms have adopted this policy, in part evidenced by the sheer existence of a list of the “most arrogant law firms” and some who profess to have it don't consistently hold themselves to it. A lack of respect and a perception that rules are not applied equally or fairly can both damage your culture. Make this year the year of zero tolerance – take the risk of losing even the most productive partner and reap the reward. And don't hire *sshholes no matter how big their “book.” You'll thank us for it.