Is Legal Project Management Just One of Many Starting Points to Creating Effective Teams?

By Carla Landry on February 14, 2013

Last month, I opined that legal project management ("LPM") is a potential solution to creating effective teams. Today, I'm adding (or perhaps clarifying) that it's one of many starting points.

Managing projects using LPM skills and techniques will not, in and of itself, create a <u>culture</u> of effective teams. LPM engages team members in a more collaborative way than many have been in the past and enables a project team to complete a matter more effectively. However, LPM techniques by themselves are only part of what it takes to create a culture of teamwork. Success beyond that matter or project comes in degrees…and takes time.

So what can you do to grow from good teamwork on a single matter to an overall firm culture of teamwork? It's likely there are systemic issues to address.   Here are few important ones:

- *Technology* – Does your firm have technology to support a broad rollout of LPM? In this instance, technology includes not only budgeting tools that many firms have purchased or developed on their own, but also tools for project planning, process mapping and more. If the firm does not have this infrastructure, those early adopters of LPM are likely frustrated and not as efficient as they could be. Further, and perhaps more detrimental to your efforts, those "nay-sayers" of LPM will decide that LPM is too time-consuming.

- *Practice management style* – Do your practice groups work like cohesive units or are they more like a group of autonomous lawyers practicing the same area of law? Do they share common goals, collaborate on projects, work together to position the practice in the marketplace and generally function like a team? While you can have successful LPM pilots in a firm that does not have a strong, empowered practice management structure, it is unlikely to work on a firm-wide basis without that foundation.

- *Nature of the client base* – Are most of your client projects small? Do the majority of your clients only want "that" partner to work on his/her matter? If this is the case, there's not an opportunity for teaming.

- *Knowledge management* – Do your lawyers invest in developing "best practice" documents for each matter type? Do they share their work product with their colleagues to help them serve clients or do they keep it to themselves? Many consider KM to be one of the core elements of any successful LPM initiative. Yet, KM typically fails without strong teamwork since the very foundation of KM is sharing of knowledge across professionals.

- *Compensation* – Have you aligned your compensation system to reward teamwork and incentivize investing time now to be more efficient on clients' matters later? Are your lawyers rewarded for the profitability of their matters or for volume revenues, as most law firms have done historically? Are your associates incentivized primarily to bill high hours or to become highly efficient at certain types of work?   If these are not true, your compensation system becomes the driver of your firm culture and LPM skills and techniques may never be adopted.

Systemic issues take time to address, but if legal project management is important to your firm's market position, client base or future profitability, a culture of true teamwork is not only important, it is critical. While it may not be easy, I return to a thought I had a few months ago – the point is to get started somewhere and have the patience to follow through.