

The Value of Values

By [Michael D. Short](#) on August 4, 2015

I was recently driving through a small town in rural Virginia where I passed an idyllic little white church that belongs on a postcard or a jigsaw puzzle. On the church's announcement board near the road was their weekly inspirational quote, which was well worth a glance because it became the focus of my blog this month:

"If your values are defined, then decisions are easy."

For an individual, the meaning is clear but I also see an organizational context for this statement that ties directly to our strategy work.

A successful strategy requires a careful alignment among tangible elements (e.g., the desired competitive position in the marketplace, the implementation plan, and the supporting systems and processes) and the intangible elements (e.g., internal and external momentum around the process, the level of buy-in and support for the plan, and the firm's culture...which is a reflection of its *values*).

Firm culture, and the values that it represents, is a tricky element to manage. Each law firm has one. Most firms think their culture is incredibly unique and unrivaled, yet each firm describes theirs in a manner that is predictably similar to competitors. Subtle differences exist and it is vitally important for each firm to understand its culture at a deep level because it is the key reason why all of the lawyers and staff keep showing up for work each and every day. Culture and values are the primary glue that holds a law firm together.

Increasingly within the construction of a law firm strategy, a description of the key elements of a law firm's culture is taking the more formal structure of a list of "core values." These are the describable, foundational elements of the firm's culture that define the behavioral ground rules that result in the work environment that everyone finds appealing. Some firms publish their core values internally and a few are so committed to the concept that they show the list to clients.

Core values are the answers to questions such as:

- What does it mean to be a lawyer here? (Being ethical and professional are givens. The next sentences usually focus on client service standards and expectations.)
- What is expected of a Partner here? (Beyond the ability to act as "first chair" on matters, are there expectations for other types of contributions? Is there an expectation on the overall hours required to be a Partner? Must you cross-sell your clients? Maintain a book of a certain size?)
- What behaviors will not be tolerated under any circumstance? (Can you yell in the hallways? Lord over client relationships? Drive Associates out of the firm? Are 800 pound gorillas tolerated?)
- What behaviors are encouraged and rewarded? (Teamwork? Supporting your partner's business development efforts and client work? Mentoring and training young lawyers?)
- Are there specific causes that the firm will support? Characteristics in the talent pool that are desired? (Are you building a diverse workforce? Does "work-life" have a place in the firm? Is the firm known for its commitment to professional development?)

Within corporate strategies, core values are quite commonplace. While I didn't include them in much of my strategy work prior to the recession, I am increasingly finding not only the desire, but the need, to include core values in law firm strategies now. In some instances this is to clearly articulate and re-dedicate to what exists and is expected but, more and more, it is to define what the firm wants to become AND is willing to define, defend, and enforce.

Now, back to the quote – A firm that truly understands its core values and uses them to support decision-making across the organization has reached an advanced point in its strategic evolution. Hiring an Associate? Automatically make sure that the talent pool includes an appropriate number of candidates of diverse background. See a Partner behaving poorly toward a staff member? Know that you can report the incident to the Managing Partner without retribution AND with the reasonable expectation of some form of follow-up with the bully. See a client team miss a deadline? Report it to the Practice Group Leader immediately.

What are your firm's core values and, more importantly, do you live up to them or are they just nice words for an announcement board? The answer will come from the decisions you make.