

The Four Cardinal Virtues of Law Firm Culture

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Law firm “culture” isn’t that hard to define. Culture is what people at the law firm actually do every day — or, less sunnily, what people get away with doing.

I’ve worked in organizations that struck committees to study and define the organizational culture, but that failed to appreciate that the most accurate definition of culture is *what actually happens around here*. A law firm’s culture is the daily manifestation of its explicit performance expectations and implicit behavioral norms — what is encouraged and what is tolerated. And the culture that a law firm develops and sustains has an impact on its productivity, retention rates, and morale — positive or negative, as the case might be.

What behaviors does your firm encourage, and what behaviors does it tolerate? If your firm is typical of the genre, it encourages:

- individual effort and achievement,
- competitive relationships with colleagues,
- prioritizing financial success above personal well-being, and
- the development of an adversarial subtext to the lawyer-client relationship.

Your firm’s culture, if typical, also tolerates:

- the application of different standards of conduct to high-earning lawyers,
- the differential treatment of lawyers and “non-lawyers,”
- the generous interpretation of “billable hours” assigned to a client file, and
- the emotional or verbal abuse of junior lawyers and staff.

I’m sorry to recite a list of such unpleasant cultural features. But the foregoing collection of encouraged and tolerated behaviors is so common within law firms as to virtually constitute a definition of the species.

Whether this accurately describes your firm or not, what is indisputable is that a firm that develops and maintains a culture that prioritizes behavioral norms in polar opposition to these will be an outstanding exception to the general rule, and will accordingly reap tremendous benefits in terms of morale, productivity, recruitment, and differentiation.

If you want your firm to develop that kind of outstanding culture, you must do everything you can to encourage practical, everyday behaviors that will bring about these cultural conditions, and to apply a zero-tolerance approach to behaviors that will ruin it.

Allow me to suggest four “cardinal virtues” for law firm culture — core cultural values that law firms can and should prioritize and incentivize — along with examples of how they might be exemplified and how they would be violated.

A. Consideration For Clients. Displaying a genuine interest in, affection for, and devotion to the overall welfare of the firm’s clients.

- *Exemplified by:* personal engagement through regular communication; asking about ways to reduce clients’ unnecessary legal spend.
- *Violated by:* failing to keep clients informed or to respond promptly to inquiries; issuing an invoice containing unexpected fees with no warning.

B. Respect For Colleagues. Treating both lawyers and staff members thoughtfully, professionally, and in a collegial and kindly manner.

- *Exemplified by:* Politeness even in stressful situations; sharing credit for good outcomes and accepting responsibility for poor ones.
- *Violated by:* Yelling at employees or junior colleagues; fighting for business origination credits beyond what is reasonable.

C. Service To Community. Contributing valuable time and real efforts to the firm’s community service commitment.

- *Exemplified by:* Donating money to a firm fundraising event proportional to one’s means; rolling up one’s sleeves to lead a community project.
- *Violated by:* Refusing to join a community service committee without good cause; unreasonably withholding consent for charitable donation of some firm profits.

D. Care For Oneself. Paying close attention to maintaining one’s physical, mental, and emotional health, and seeking assistance when necessary.

- *Exemplified by:* Taking every day of allotted vacation time; adopting at least one hobby or outside interest to advance one’s well-being.
- *Violated by:* Relentlessly working nights and weekends without proper rest and recovery; inflicting undue amounts of criticism on oneself.

Not all of these cultural values are easily measured in practical terms, but many of their associated behaviors can be assessed. Survey clients about whether they are happy with the level of care they received from each person in the firm. Ask colleagues and employees to anonymously assess that person’s conduct towards them and others. Ask the person to file an annual report detailing his or her community service efforts. And retain the services of a counsellor to regularly assess the health and well-being of all lawyers and employees.

Your firm’s culture is expressed by what actually happens there every day. Decide upfront what kind of culture you want, identify the behaviors that will exemplify and develop that culture, and take active steps to encourage and measure those behaviors. That’s how to make a real culture, and how to make a culture real.

*This is an excerpt from **Law Is A Buyer’s Market: Building a Client-First Law Firm in the 21st Century**, to be published in Summer 2016. Contact the author, [Jordan Furlong](#).*