

STRATEGIC PLANNING – ESSENTIAL FOR ANY SIZE FIRM

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I work with a lot of firms in the area of strategic planning. If I had to approximate, I'd say that less than 30% of firms actually do strategic planning. And of those which do, probably less than half are effective at it. From my perspective, planning is defined as effective only if it actually results in action or resolution. Attorneys who have been through the process *ineffectively* conclude it's a monumental waste of time.

Strategic planning is never a waste of time. And it's always beneficial to a firm when done *effectively*, regardless of the size of the firm. ***Failing to plan is planning to fail***. This proverb is widely attributed to Winston Churchill and Benjamin Franklin. Regardless of who coined the phrase, it has withstood the test of time.

Let's start off with what often differentiates effective from ineffective planning. If you're expecting a lot of complexity, you're mistaken. It's actually very simple. You start by identifying a goal. The goal should be clear and measurable. For example, setting a goal of increasing corporate work is not clear and measurable. Setting a goal of increasing corporate work by 15% within six months is clear and measurable. Setting a goal of improving profit is not clear and measurable. Setting a goal of lowering overhead by 3%, and improving billing realization by 2% by the end of the year, is clear and measurable.

Once a goal is set, the next step is to ask, "what do I have to do to get there?" What are the objectives which must be accomplished to get to the goal? Let's go back to our first goal of increasing corporate work by 15%. Objectives leading to the goal need to be succinct and measurable. One objective might be a cross-marketing campaign. Is that succinct enough? It could be better. A cross-marketing campaign aimed at current clients of a particular attorney/department resulting in not less than 5 new matters by year end. Now that's clear and measurable.

What is necessary to achieve the particular objective? Many incremental steps come to mind. Obtaining the list of prospects with contact information. Sorting the prospects based on anticipated likelihood of success. Arranging introductory meetings. Creating a seminar. Publishing a topical article, and getting

reprints in the hands of the prospects. On-site no charge visits for the largest of the prospects. And so forth. Perhaps one of your first objectives is to interview various marketing firms and select one to help the firm identify remaining objectives to reach the goal.

Every goal should be broken down into each objective necessary to reach it. Each objective should be broken down into the necessary steps to achieve it. Now comes the most important critical part of the process; that which will differentiate success from failure. **Write it down. Determine who will be responsible for each individual step. Determine when it should be completed. Estimate the time involved. Get it on the calendar sufficiently in advance of the deadline.**

Nope, not rocket science. But you'd be amazed how many attorneys have brilliant ideas, but fail to flesh them out. Most are so over-reaching they can never be achieved as stated. Seldom are the ideas translated into goals, objectives and tasks. And even less often are individuals made accountable for their part(s) in the process, let alone calendaring the actual time required.

So what happens if you don't? Life happens. Work happens. Next thing you know the end of the year is in sight, and nothing has been accomplished. Lots of brilliant ideas once again, and no execution. Was the time spent coming up with the ideas a waste of time? No. Failing to invest the additional time required to translate the ideas into a written action plan is the problem. Failing to commit time on the calendar is the problem.

I'm not a big believer in strategic plans which are 75+ pages of text. Yes, for firms which have become quite good at strategic planning, and update their plan annually, a document such as this is a roadmap for success. For most of you out there, you must walk before you run. So a much simpler form which is more of a checklist will serve you better. [For a sample of a simple individual planning form, send an email request to lawpractice@pabar.org.]

An important aspect to strategic planning is to create an environment in which ideas can be generated, and difficult issues can be addressed. We're not talking about a regular partner's meeting. Mostly day-to-day or short-term matters are handled in that environment. To do it right, there must be sufficient time set aside to spend in a distraction-free environment. Hopefully one which is comfortable and relaxing. Yes, folks, we're talking about a retreat.

Before you tune out based on past experience, at least indulge me your continued attention for another paragraph or two. (I've earned that much!) Many of you have had horrible experiences with retreats. The complaint I typically hear is that a lot of time and money was invested. However (a) everyone got the adrenalin flowing and came up with great ideas, which resulted in absolutely no action after the retreat; or (b) the retreat was dominated by one or two strong personalities and most partners just got further frustrated by the inability to voice their opinions or bring about meaningful change; or (c) the discussion degenerated quickly into a nasty finger-pointing exercise; or (d) most of the time was spent reviewing past performance, and insufficient time remained for planning for the future.

These are not all the complaints I hear about retreat experiences, but they are most typical. Any sound familiar? The fact is, most firms do not have someone with the skills necessary to run a retreat effectively. That's what a facilitator is for.

The role of the facilitator, if done right, is more complex than firms realize. The facilitator ensures that

- Everyone gets a chance to be "heard"
- No one overly dominates the discussion
- Dialog remains civil and doesn't degrade into personal attack
- Adequate time is scheduled for each agenda topic
- Adequate time is scheduled for the retreat, depending on the final agenda
- The meeting progresses according to schedule
- Decisions are documented
- Ideas are sufficiently vetted to begin the process of identifying objectives, and assigning responsibility to move the process forward following the retreat
- All partners get to participate equally since none are running the retreat
- Issues which are simmering under the radar screen of firm management are identified prior to the retreat, discussed, and added to the agenda where appropriate

A good facilitator also contributes throughout the retreat. When working through ideas, attorneys frequently need to know what other firms do; what works and what doesn't. The facilitator should have a strong understanding of the legal industry, and be able to provide clarification and food for thought, as well as an unbiased viewpoint. The facilitator often provides ideas to start creative thought in a particular direction, to aid the firm in the creative process.

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If your firm is faced with issues which will not go away, lacks clear vision and focus, lacks alignment of goals, is stagnant, fails to meet earnings objectives, or suffers from defection or turnover, you're overdue for strategic planning.

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