

How To Get Partners To Work Together As A Team

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, New York (February 7, 2017, 5:29 PM EST) -- When Eversheds and Sutherland Asbill & Brennan LLP announced Wednesday that their transatlantic tie-up was complete, the combined firm also revealed a special bonus pool aimed at rewarding teamwork.

The bonuses are meant to encourage partners to engage in behavior, such as cross-selling and collaboration, that will further the aim of the combined law firm, as well as its now-shared clients. The move is likely a positive step in the direction of unity and one of several tools law firms in a similar situation can use to promote collaboration, according to Heidi Gardner, a fellow in the Center on the Legal Profession at Harvard Law School.

“A bonus pool can be helpful in that it provides a strong signal of what leaders value and what partners should value in each other,” Gardner said.

But bonuses are only one element of a much larger whole when it comes to successful strategies for nurturing collaboration among partners, according to Gardner.

The first step is building familiarity among colleagues — which can be more difficult in large firms with offices across the globe — so that they truly know their partners and understand what they do.

“Partners need more than a glancing familiarity of what else the law firm offers. They also need to have a familiarity with jargon and different types of approaches and different kinds of problems their clients encounter so they can connect the dots inside their firm,” Gardner said.

Jill Huse of Society 54 said that she has seen even small practice groups made up of 15 partners with team members who don’t understand their colleagues’ practices.

“How is an attorney supposed to cross-sell his or her colleagues if they don’t know what they do? Law firms need to build to those internal relationships so that attorneys can trust their colleagues and feel comfortable sending them clients’ work,” Huse said.

One way to promote that deep understanding and consequent collaboration is by creating strong industry groups that bring together partners from multiple practice areas onto one team, according to John Remsen of The Remsen Group.

“Industry-oriented groups allow partners to leverage their client relationships as a team and allow them to accomplish much more than running around like a bunch of lone wolves,” Remsen said. “The problem is that a lot of firms set these up, and they’re in name only.”

In order to accomplish the intended goal, the groups must meet regularly, share information, develop shared goals and coordinate on plans to accomplish those goals, he said. It is also important for the firm’s leadership to emphasize that clients are shared rather than belonging to one partner or another, he added.

“You have to break that down and celebrate sharing, teamwork, talk about it and build it into your culture,” Remsen said. “The managing partner should call people out when they use the term ‘my client.’ No, they are our clients.”

After creating familiarity and emphasizing the importance of collaboration comes an even bigger challenge for law firms — developing trust among partners.

Gardner laid out two types of trust necessary for creating a collaborative law firm: competence trust and interpersonal trust. The first involves partners being able to open up their clients, through cross-selling and referrals, and to trust those colleagues will handle the work competently and with adequate skill. The second hinges on the belief that one’s partners have good intentions and won’t do something to undermine the relationship like walk away from the combined firm and steal clients.

“Those are deeply psychological issues you can’t buy your way into,” Gardner said.

Gardner suggested a multifaceted approach to creating an environment that promotes teamwork, which can include monetary incentives.

“It’s important for leaders to develop and continuously reinforce their vision and why collaboration is an essential piece of that vision,” she said.

One BigLaw firm she knows of used gamification to reward desired behaviors, Gardner said, creating a game of sorts in which lawyers can meet benchmarks or even make a small step toward collaboration — anything from getting a cup of coffee with a colleague to creating a joint pitch to clients — and compete against one another for a prize such as an Apple watch or a vacation.

“It was a relatively minor investment, but the point is they worked hard to get it, they were recognized by their peers, and they were rewarded in a way that felt valuable by the chair of the firm. People appreciate the recognition that comes along with it,” she said.

But money can be a major motivator, and the compensation element cannot be ignored, experts said.

“You build the culture you want and reinforce it through compensation,” Remsen said.

In a recent interview with Law360, Mayer Brown LLP banking and finance practice co-leader Carol Hitselberger described the law firm’s compensation structure and said the firm’s chairman evaluates compensation on the basis of how well partners help one another, calling it a top-down mantra that “makes us a terrific team.”

Billing credits are allocated so that there’s a total of 200 percent credit to share. That means one partner

could get 100 percent credit for sourcing work, and another could get 100 percent for doing the work. The firm's partners aren't motivated to "hog credit," and there's no stigma to working with someone else's sourced matter, which serves as a motivating factor to engage in teamwork, Hitselberger said.

According to Mayer Brown chairman Paul Theiss, many of the core principles of his firm's strategy are centered around creating a culture of teamwork and collaboration.

"Our strategy includes a focus on client and industry teams that are cross-practice, cross-office groups of partners all working together to better serve our clients in a consistent and coordinated manner," Theiss said. "Team leaders are lauded for engagements performed by partners other than the team leader and in practice and geographic areas that are different from those of the team leaders. We are strong believers that this approach helps us to serve our clients at the world-class level they deserve."

According to Charles Volkert, of Robert Half Legal, base compensation and bonuses go hand in hand to create an atmosphere where collaborative behaviors — like cross-selling or referrals — are properly incentivized.

"Unless there are clear incentives or cross-selling comes up in performance or compensation reviews, attorneys will likely prioritize meeting billable hours requirements," Volkert said. "Creating a bonus system to reward partners can go a long way to facilitate cross-selling activities and boost client referrals."

He added that sharing credit can also be useful to creating a collaborative environment so that lawyers who make referrals and work together in pairs or as teams get credit and recognition, not just those who brought in the business.

Michael Rynowecer of BTI Consulting Group said his research has shown that the best incentives are focused on actions rather than results.

"What the best-run firms do is they realize that it's the activities and the behaviors that drive the results. [M]oving compensation back one step and making sure partners are engaged in activities the firm knows will deliver results, leads to more success over a wide range of partners," Rynowecer said.

--Editing by Christine Chun and Kelly Duncan.