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Law firms could learn a lot from Weight Watchers about performance management

Weight Watchers characterises itself as the most effective weight management organisation in the world. It combines exercise and diet to help people to manage their weight. Its programme differs from that of many others in that it requires participants to weigh in weekly. To be part of the programme, participants must come to a designated place to be weighed. The accountability factor makes the programme work: when people are held accountable, they perform. Law firms could learn a great deal from this approach.

Accountability comes into play in the planning process for law firms and their members. Lawyers are great planners. Firms embrace the strategic planning concept. They create volumes of plans and goals. These plans consume hours of thought and discussion; consensus-building abounds. The firm adopts a well-crafted plan that will lead it to the Promised Land.

Unfortunately, very rarely does the Promised Land extend much beyond a shelf in the managing partner's office. Why does such a well-thought out and drafted plan meet such an unceremonious demise? Drafting the plan becomes the be-all and end-all: execution becomes the difficult, rarely-taken second step.

Failure in execution also limits a law firm's efforts to make its lawyers better. Almost all firms now require their lawyers to create personal development plans. These plans talk about all the things needed to be a great lawyer – marketing, billing hours and developing skills and knowledge. The managing partner or practice group leader spends time reviewing and tweaking the plan to set the lawyer on the right course. That usually marks the end of management's involvement.

The plan may surface a year later when the lawyer meets for his annual review. By then, the lawyer usually points to his accomplishments during the year as a successful completion of the plan. As a result, very few personal development plans lead to much more than an exercise in writing.

Planning and achieving

So how does a firm of great planners become a firm of great achievers? Weight Watchers has the answer. Holding people accountable by making them report regularly on their accomplishments leads to successful execution. Magically, someone with a date to report will have something to report. Most firms need to have a 'weigh in'. Without a mechanism for regular monitoring, plans get old and cold. That leads to failure.

> **"Without a mechanism for regular monitoring, plans get old and cold"**

How does the review process work? First, the firm sets specific goals for those charged with executing the plan. For example, if the plan contemplates expanding the firm's real estate practice, the firm should set the goal of hiring one or more real estate practitioners with books of business of at least $750,000. That sets a definite measuring stick for success or failure. The firm also needs to set a deadline to accomplish the goal. That way, the lawyer knows what he has to do and by when. He either accomplishes the goal or not; nothing remains for discussion.

After setting a few specific goals, the firm must regularly monitor progress. Weekly calls are a waste of time as not much happens in a week; reports often become perfunctory. Conversely, a year is too long – too much can happen in a year. January's gourmet delight becomes December's leftovers. Yearly reports usually do not reflect a review of the plan, but a recitation of the lawyer's accomplishments.

Most lawyers and firms respond best to quarterly reports. Quarterly reporting puts a burden on the lawyer to accomplish his goals and gives him time to do it. They also allow the firm to focus on current goals. Most importantly, much like Weight Watchers, the lawyer knows the date of the meeting and will have something to report.

How should the report take place? It needs to be in a face-to-face meeting. That enhances both the importance of the meeting and the need to have something to report. Written and telephonic reports diminish their impact. No one likes to be embarrassed by quickly ending a meeting with a superior with the dreaded 'nothing to report, sir'.

That leaves time-consuming face-to-face reporting. The results merit the time invested. Usually the amount of time spent on these meetings equals a fraction of the time and money invested in the planning process. A face-to face meeting to review progress and set new goals for the next quarter brings a great return on the time invested.

Personal accountability

In summary, both law firms' and individuals' plans often fail due to a lack of accountability on the part of the person executing the plan. That lack of accountability can be corrected by setting specific goals, creating timelines for their achievement and then monitoring progress towards their accomplishment. Accountability works for Weight Watchers, it will also work for law firms.

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