

## The Flip Side of Client Relations



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Private practice lawyers are mostly involved with one side of client relations: service provision. By contrast, in-house counsel deal with both sides of client relations. They both manage external lawyers as client representatives, seeking client-focused solutions, and they both deal with their organization's own managers, providing client-focused advice.

Logically, these are two sides of the same coin. But many legal departments tend to view client relations from the same perspective as outside counsel: They look only to their own clients for ways to lift their game. But innovative corporate counsel shouldn't limit themselves to just one source of advice on how to improve their client focus. They might also benefit from involving external counsel in that process.

### SURVEY SAYS

It might seem counterintuitive to recommend that corporate counsel look to their law firms for advice on client focus. Although most law firms are in some respects already strongly client focused, surveys of corporate counsel continue to highlight a divide between these firms' notion of great client-focus efforts and what clients say they want.

It seems that firms' views of client focus often emanate from their own perspective, driven by hours worked and other elements of firms' systems. It's client focus, but it's a firm-perspec-

tive client focus. For law firms, the message from corporate counsel is clear: Value is vital, and cost is important, but client focus from a genuine client perspective is paramount.

For legal departments, the whole matter of understanding client focus seems easier; after all, they are themselves part of the client. Yet in-house counsel shouldn't be complacent. Internal clients might well think that all lawyers act pretty much the same way. Internal clients might well see in-house lawyers as being more responsive, more available, and more attuned to organizational goals and strategies, yet still see the legal process as an unwieldy one, painting all practitioners of the law's dark arts with the same brush.

The natural response of alert legal departments might be to conduct a client survey to identify what client representatives really think of the organization's lawyers. Nowadays, many conduct annual surveys, and some of the best legal departments have learned best practice lessons, such as:

- having "a bit of a chat" with a few selected clients may be affirming, but for accuracy and value is often virtually meaningless;
- commissioning independent research enables clients to be truly frank, both in criticism and praise.

These are valuable lessons. But the focus of some in-house client surveys may be too narrow. Although their own client representatives clearly remain the most important element of such research, innovative legal departments might consider widening their scope.

### LEARNING VALUE FROM OUTSIDE COUNSEL

Internal client representatives aren't the only source of insights for improv-

ing the legal department's effectiveness. Outside counsel can also be extremely helpful.

- Outside counsel directly participate in many of the interactions between in-house counsel and their organizational client, for example, as joint participants at meetings;
- With a deep understanding of the legal and corporate environment, outside counsel often indirectly observe many of the communications between in-house counsel and their organizational client, such as copies of advice memoranda and management papers; and
- Unlike most internal client representatives, outside counsel have the benefit of working with a wide range of other organizational clients.

In short, outside counsel often see some of the best, and worst, practices of corporate counsel across a wide range of organizations. When outside counsel combine that experience with a good understanding of your particular situation, they can become a rich source of insight.

Legal departments serious about seeking an objective view of their own client relations should therefore consider asking not only their internal clients, but also their primary law firms, for independent and confidential feedback about how well the legal team is operating. This would be an opportunity for the most innovative (and bravest?) legal teams to obtain valuable tips for improving client focus—albeit at the risk of puncturing a few misconceptions.

For the most accurate assessment of a legal department's client relations, it helps to look from both sides of the coin. ■