



SHOVELING SMOKE: LEGAL CULTURE AND MOTIVATED TEAMS

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Ronald F. Pol is president of the Corporate Lawyers' Association of New Zealand ("CLANZ").

In this column on professional issues, legal department management, and relations between in-house and outside counsel, Ron Pol discusses elements of managing lawyers, sometimes likened to herding wild cats or, as he prefers, shoveling smoke.

A recent study reinforces the idea that the way in which employers and individual team members address some of the attitudes and behaviors commonly ascribed to the legal culture are not conducive to a balanced and satisfying professional life.

What's the culture like in your organization right now? In your department? In other teams? And in the firms of your outside counsel? Are they dominated by extrinsic motivators in which bonuses follow success and time equals money? And do your teams or the firms that you use have gaps, often at the all-important mid-level experience, as people leave to pursue a more satisfying career elsewhere?

For corporations and law firms alike, the legal culture is often defined by intense pressures and competitive success norms. This legal culture starts at law school, with punishing entry require-

ments and the battle for ever-higher grades to secure places with prestigious law firms and corporations. The situation hardly abates. Law firm budget pressures are legion, as are processes for attaining and holding partnership. Within corporations, the spread of success-based performance targets and bonuses to legal departments ensures that in-house counsel experience similar competitive norms.

For teams, the issue is more complex. You are part of many teams, as leader or member. The legal department is one such team. Others include in-house lawyers and business unit representatives. Many teams include outside counsel, with the cultural overlay of their own firms. Time adds further complexity. Not only do individual and team motivating factors change over time, but also many teams are transaction-driven, with members joining and leaving as transactions evolve.

Intense pressures and competitive cultures are not bad per se, yet recent research suggests that the way that people meet these pressures may affect motivation, satisfaction, and professionalism.

Professors Kennon Sheldon of the University of Missouri-Columbia and Lawrence Krieger of Florida State University's College of Law recently completed a multi-year study (forthcoming in *Behavioral Sciences and Law*, 2004), which found that

incoming law students were happier, more well-adjusted, and motivated by intrinsic factors, such as service to the community, than when they graduated and entered the profession. Their intrinsic values and motivations shifted significantly toward more extrinsic orientations, such as money and prestige. Yet this shift combined with a marked fall in their well-being and life satisfaction.



The study focused on the first stage of the legal profession: law school. Similar research at later stages would be valuable. Yet it might be reasonably safe to assume that a lack of satisfaction, despite apparent trappings of success, is endemic within the profession and that it applies equally to corporate counsel and their law firm colleagues. This assumption should be cause for concern for organizations that employ lawyers.

The success of any team is affected by individual motivation and job satisfaction of its members, yet organizations seldom seem to connect directly with the intrinsic drivers of their teams, instead applying "motivational" tools aligned

with extrinsic motivators more easily linked with superficial measures of "success."

For some organizations and your outside counsel, the application, perception, or effect of existing retention and motivation tools might, ironically, erode the most powerful intrinsic motivators of your people and may ultimately turn away some of those who could make positive contributions to an organization's ability to achieve its goals—and the self-worth and perceived value of the profession.

So what can you do about it? From an organizational perspective, the goal is to help develop teams of highly motivated people, with the organization connected to their drivers, enabling it more effectively to meet organizational goals.

From an employment perspective, do you have systems and processes enabling your people genuinely to thrive and be satisfied, irrespective of, or even leveraging from, a culture dominated by extrinsic motivators?

From a personal perspective, do you let the pressures of extrinsic factors sap your more powerful intrinsic motivators, such as doing a great job with competence, integrity, respect for and from others, authenticity, meaning—and fun?

Your answers to these questions and perhaps even the fact that you ask them might help keep externally

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imposed “motivators” in perspective and may help you and your team retain the fundamental essence of key intrinsic drivers that caused you to enter law school in the first place.

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