Mission, Vision and Values: The Best Tools for Keeping Your Law Firm on Course

I. Introduction

When it comes to developing fulfilling and profitable practices solo and small sized firms have several strategic advantages over their larger competitors:

- Planning and rapid decision making is easier without the cumbersome partner politics of larger firms.
- Small firms can easily focus on developing specialized expertise in niche practice areas.
- Small firms can form powerful referral networks of colleagues with complimentary practices.
- Finally, it costs less to run a small practice, so when run strategically; a small firm can be very profitable.

The challenge for many small firms, like their larger counterparts, is that they are not run strategically. And for small firms this can be a costly mistake. Solo and small firms don’t have the management and marketing budgets of larger firms. They often cannot afford to hire outside help so partners are required to do the work that is handled by professional staff at larger firms.

Many small firms and lawyers charged with managing their practices feel overwhelmed. The reality is that most law firms are operating without a business plan, with no clear sense of why their clients come to them, what their clients like and don’t like about the firm, and what the true profitability of their practice is. They have little idea how to build the firm, bring in more profitable work, diversify the practice, or bring in better clients.

The question is: how does a solo lawyer, or small firm, take control of its practice?

The answer? By taking the time to think through, discuss, and establish a mission, vision, and values for the firm and using these as the foundations for goal setting and planning.

Having a compelling vision of what you want to achieve, and a clear understanding of what you are doing to achieve that vision is the most important tool for keeping yourself on course.

In this paper I have set out a planning roadmap to guide you in developing your own vision, mission and values statements. Here are some key principles before you begin:

- Keep it simple. You’re aiming for Haiku not War and Peace.
- Don’t worry about getting it perfectly right. You can always change it.
- Don’t get stuck in the details. This is a big picture document.
- Don’t take too much time. The good news for solo and small firm lawyers is you don’t have to get buy in from fifty other partners!
II. Vision Statement

The starting point is your vision statement. It describes a picture of the preferred future result your firm is after.

Your vision statement will tell a compelling story about the future you are going to create. I recommend your vision statement looks forward 3 to 5 years. Some people advocate for longer term perspectives but given the speed at which the world changes these days I think it makes more sense to work within a shorter time line.

Here are some questions to help you create a vision statement:

- What do we ultimately want to achieve with our practice – in terms of service to others?
- What do we want the firm to be known for?
- What reputation do we wish the firm to have in the business, legal, or other communities?
- Who are our ideal clients?
- What do we want to financially achieve?
- What kind of colleagues do we want?

Start by answering these questions in depth. Next, take out your pen and edit down your answers until you reach the most important points.

Here’s an example of a vision statement for a US boutique litigation firm:

We are now routinely considered for any major case on the West Coast. Our goal is to be recognized as one of the few firms that must be considered for any major litigation anywhere. When a CEO asks his or her general counsel for the best trial lawyers, we want to be on the short list.

We want to continue to enhance our image as informal, collegial, diverse, hard-working, incisive, original, aggressive and principled lawyers. To continue recruiting the best talent; to deliver outstanding quality at a reasonable cost; and to win. First, last and always, to win. To think of each new case as if it were the first one we had in 1986: On this case depends our entire reputation; we have no laurels on which to rest.

III. Mission Statement

After you have come up with your vision statement the next step is to summarize what you are doing in the present and who your clients are. It summarizes the work you do, the clients you do it for, and the characteristics that distinguish your firm from others in the market place.

Here are some questions for developing your mission statement.
• What do we do? (This question really gets to the heart of why you are practicing law, and what your firm is all about.)
• Who are our clients? Do they come from particular industries, business, and professions?
• What are the principle benefits the firm offers to the clients?
• What size are we?
• What geographical market/s do we serve?
• What distinguishes us from other law firms in terms of the size, style and approach we take?

Mission statements can be from one sentence to three or four in length.

Example one:

“Our firm is a committed and resourceful group of like-minded professionals focused on the pursuit of justice. Our Mission is to provide exemplary, caring and professional legal services to those who have been injured or harmed through the negligence or actions of others. We believe that everyone deserves access to our civil justice system so those wrongdoers are held accountable for their actions.”

Example two:

• To litigate thoroughly, based on a coherent well-prepared case.
• To negotiate with poise, patience, firmness, common sense, and creativity.
• To empower our clients to make intelligent and informed decisions by educating them to understand the legal and procedural issues involved in the case.
• To treat clients, opposing counsel, witnesses, judges, magistrates, guardians and court personnel with civility and respect.
• To give clients professional advice well-based upon the law and local practice.
• To stay abreast of recent court rulings, statutes, and enjoy professional relationships with court staffs.
• To be forthright about the reasonableness and attainability of the client’s goals.

IV. Values

Once you have your mission and vision figured out, it is important to take some time to talk about values. Values describe the core beliefs at the heart of your firm’s culture, and that are the foundation of all the action and investments you will make. Values are often incorporated into mission and vision statements as those elements which distinguish the firm from other. The examples of vision and mission above both included references to values.

Here are some questions you can use to explore your firm’s values:

• Which professional and personal attributes do we most value?
• Which professional and personal qualities do we wish to be known for in the legal community and by our clients?
• What qualities and attributes do we wish to characterize our firm?

Here is an example of one firm’s list of values:

We value winning. In litigation there are winners and losers, and we do not sleep well when we lose. When clients hire trial lawyers, they do not want someone to “handle” their cases; they want someone to win them. They want someone who hates losing at least as much as they love winning. “

Integrity: In fighting hard and winning for our clients, we play by the rules. Credibility is our stock in trade. We don’t hide documents; we don’t mis-cite cases; we don’t mislead; we don’t twist the truth. We believe it is the only way.

Excellence: We value excellence. We pride ourselves on our written work. First and foremost, we are trial lawyers, but we recognize that our clients are best served if a case can be won without trial. Many cases that do go to trial are won before the jury is even seated—by motions to dismiss, for summary judgment or other motions that shape the way the case is presented. We believe motions should be won on the papers before the hearing. We balance excellence with cost-effectiveness, knowing that our briefs are a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

V. Conclusion

Your vision, mission, and values form the foundation of your firm’s plan. Use them when decision making for your firm. Ask yourself does this action move me towards the vision? Is it in alignment with my values? Does it make sense for the direction I have set out? Use them to guide you in setting some long term and short term goals for your firm, and for determining the strategies and actions you will take to get there. I have attached a planning document that you can use to get started.