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Doing away with a pecking order

'Park the ego' in order to have successful collaboration

By Grant Cameron

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The office of Sherrard Kuzz LLP, a mid-size employment and labour law firm in downtown Toronto, doesn't look like your traditional legal workplace.

For starters, the offices are roughly the same size. The floorplan of each is similar. Even the furniture matches.

It's no accident. The firm has tried to create a collaborative environment. Instead of a top-down approach, the firm operates on the premise that everybody is on equal footing. Ideas and solutions proposed by associates are just as valid as a partner's.

As Shana French, one of the firm's lawyers explains, the environment promotes more interaction between lawyers, encouraging them to get together and share ideas.

"We always joke that we're like a baseball team," says French. "I can't play first base and pitch and play outfield effectively. So, you have to play to people's strengths and to do that you have to get to know them and have that honest interaction."

The collaboration creates a more powerful thought dynamic and allows partners, associates and junior lawyers to exchange ideas and better serve clients, she says.

"It's nothing to say, 'Hey guys, I need four of you to go into a boardroom with me,' and we get out a whiteboard and brainstorm and engage in healthy debate," she says. "The advantage for me is that we can provide better service and there's efficiencies."

Sherrard Kuzz is not alone. Law firms big and small are embracing the collaborative approach — albeit slowly.

Hull & Hull LLP in Toronto is another firm that's changed its practice.

The firm has two "synergy rooms" set up with desks. Two partners are assigned to each room and associates are encouraged to go in and work alongside them. "We're actually looking at each other, in a sense," says firm co-founder Ian Hull. "It's almost like a bullpen but as partners we stay there. It's our permanent spot and that, first of all, helps the mentoring but it also sort of allows rapid-fire solutions."

Working in the rooms allows partners and associates to discuss files and bounce ideas off one another. Partners can also offer suggestions to associates working on files.

"It sort of helps the discussion," says Hull, "but it's also tremendously helpful for mentoring."

The firm also holds retreats twice a year and regularly distributes articles that point out the benefits of collaboration.

Hull says the top-down approach to managing a law firm is old-school and, because the legal world is more competitive, lawyers must do a better job of working as a team.



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He says the collaborative approach is a better fit in today's world because it ensures there's always somebody at the law firm who can step in and help a client.

"I just don't see how the old-fashioned rainmaker model can sustain itself. I don't think people operate that way in business anymore. You need leadership, but it comes down to the fact that if we don't collaborate as a team to get the new business we're not going to get the new business and people are going to get ahead of us."

Mark Dormer, president of Cosgrove Associates Inc. in Toronto, says change is occurring slowly but firms of all sizes are moving toward a collaborative approach.

"It's a slow change, that's what I'm finding. It's because law firm structures have always been very traditionally a tree structure rather than a collaborative structure."

Traditionally, law firms have partners, associates, clerks, legal assistants and other staff and the instructions flow down, says Dormer, but the collaborative approach is better because employees take ownership and the firm is more vibrant.

"If you get more people involved you can manage a higher volume of work and it is more profitable that way. You end up with people doing the right job at the right rate. It can also bring about a more harmonious workplace and help with retention."

In a collaborative environment, people feel more valuable and that their input is important, says Dormer.

"They feel like they're more involved, that they have a stake in the whole process."

Dormer says the change is being driven by young lawyers who've been trained in school that the collaborative approach is the best way to solve problems.

"You need to change people's view on things, especially the senior partners or lawyers who may have been entrenched for a long time. They've got to start letting go a little of the control they had over their files."

French of Sherrard Kuzz says many lawyers still cling to the old way of thinking that they own a file and invite an associate to work on it.

Traditionally, lawyers like to know the pecking order and have their names listed on the firm's letterhead, she says, but the collaborative approach takes all that out of the equation and allows individuals to focus on client service, rather than their egos.

"Once you park the ego then you can have genuine collaboration because you have to trust one another."

French says she thinks nothing of working on a file for a junior lawyer because it benefits the firm.

"It is really nothing for a first-year lawyer to email or call me to get me to review a document for them by the next morning because we're all working for the same purpose, client service."

Last year, for example, she was at a social event with a young lawyer from the firm who had to get an opinion out to an important client with whom he had a relationship.

French returned to the office at 10 p.m. to prepare the opinion and sent an email, asking others in the firm if they could do some research. One of the firm's founding partners was at a hotel in Montreal and ended up doing online research for her.

"I'm writing an opinion while the first-year lawyer is out partying with a client because we all know we're going to be available to support one another."

Hull says it wasn't easy changing the attitudes of many when his firm introduced the concept of collaboration.

"There were surprisingly more hurdles than I thought I'd have to overcome. It's not conventional so most people coming into it don't expect it in our business."

For example, says Hull, the synergy rooms are still not universally enjoyed by associates.

"Some associates just don't like it, so there's still a bit of old school in it."

Hull has tried to overcome this by talking to associates about the benefits of collaboration and periodically brings in consultants to explain the process to lawyers.

"Sometimes people just get used to it and they come in a few more times and after they've done it three or four times they say, 'Hey, you know what, it's not so bad.'"

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