



LAW OFFICE MANAGEMENT

Team-Building Frenzy Reaches Law Firms

BY STEPHANIE A. ALLEN
AND ANDREA I. WILLIAMS
Special to The National Law Journal

CORPORATE America has jumped on a team-building bandwagon. Many books on team-building are being published, and consultants offer to transform the employees of a business into happy, functional teams through activities such as workshops. This team-building frenzy has begun to reach law firms.

The objectives and training programs for creating teams are being transplanted from the corporate environment into the legal environment with little modification. What works for corporate executives and members of other professions, however, may not work in law firms.

Firms recognize, of course, that teamwork is often the most effective way to attain a particular goal. Sometimes a team is absolutely essential — such as in handling complex litigation with 100 boxes of documents to review and two dozen depositions to defend.

Some firms have invested in elaborate team-building programs in an effort to mesh groups of lawyers into functioning teams. Some of these programs involve workshops and outdoor exercises designed to teach the importance of working toward a symbolic goal. For example, a workshop may require that a trial practice group find a particular tree on a college campus, using only a compass to guide them. A group leader is designated, and the group forms a plan. After the goal has been achieved, the group members gather to discuss their experiences.

Such "New Age"-style exercises have had mixed results when law firm personnel try to translate what they have learned into a practice setting. One problem may be that authors and consultants, when they describe and teach team-building, often are not cognizant of the differences between lawyers and other professionals. Too often, it is assumed that the team-building approach that works in the corporation will work in a law firm. But this may not be true — for reasons that have been scientifically documented.

The Johnson O'Connor Human Engineering Laboratory, a non-profit organization that tests the aptitudes of members of various professions, has determined that lawyers tend to have distinct personality styles, analytical strengths and skills. For example, successful engineers have the ability to visualize spatial relationships, while successful lawyers generally take a more abstract approach to problem-solving.

Traits Common Among Lawyers

These are some of the characteristics common to many lawyers that make team-building a special challenge:

- **Autonomy.** Lawyers are less likely to collaborate than people in other occupations. They prefer not to

be under others' control or direction. Often they adhere to their preferred approach to a problem even when another is equally desirable.

This trait comes through in team-building exercises. When formed into groups, some lawyers embrace the concept that each member should be free, even encouraged, to pursue his or her own idea, despite the resulting inefficiency and chaos. One attribute of a high-performance team is placing the group goal above the interests of the individual — but many lawyers are not naturally inclined to do that.

- **Critical approach.** The successful lawyer is highly critical. Typically, the lawyer first determines what is wrong with an idea, leaving its merits unmentioned.

Too often, it is assumed that what works in the corporation will work in the law firm. But lawyers' distinctive styles and strengths may make this untrue.

While members of effective teams openly support one another, the lawyer's critical approach does not foster open and positive support. In team-building exercises, knowing that he or she may be the focus of harsh criticism deters many lawyers from exercising a leadership role. In general, openness traditionally has not been the hallmark of the legal profession; indeed, success often requires guarded interaction.

To work on a team, however, team members must trust one another. This trust is fostered by honesty, consistency, mutual respect and openness. Trust allows a team member to take a risk because the team values his or her contribution and will give support, not criticism, even when an effort fails.

- **Competitiveness.** In fulfilling client responsibilities, a lawyer is often in a competitive position. The very nature of the legal system is adversarial. And it is a rare firm in which lawyers are rewarded, praised, compensated or advanced for being good team players.

Lawyers may have difficulty shifting from the competitive position that they must take in a transaction or in court to a collaborative approach when working with others within the firm. As competitive as lawyers are, they cannot be expected to invest energy in teamwork if those efforts go unnoticed.

Team-Building Approach

Before trying to build a team to achieve an objective or work on a given project, the law firm should ask certain questions:

- **Is a team approach the best way to accomplish this task?** Teamwork is appropriate in many situations but not all. Other options should be fully ex-

plored, such as dividing the project into discrete tasks easily accomplished by one individual.

- **Is this the right team or form of team?** A different type of group might be more appropriate to perform the task at hand. For example, the task may be completed by having all team members work directly with one central person rather than with one another.

- **Does an effective team already exist?** In forming a "by-the-book" team from scratch, a firm may be disregarding an already-existing informal team that is functioning effectively. The informal team may have resulted from long-standing relationships or may have spontaneously formed to pursue a particular goal. These "invisible" teams are often the most effective and should be acknowledged by the firm.

For example, one large firm relocated many lawyers from one floor to another to place all members of a practice group close together. The firm did not realize it was breaking up an intricate network of informal but strong and productive relationships. Over the years, lawyers with offices close to one another but not practicing in the same areas of law had become sources of support for one another, discussing cases and issues. The firm disrupted these valuable teams by imposing another team structure.

- **Do the members possess the necessary skills to operate as a team?** When a team is formed, the firm should not assume the members can automatically function well together. Lawyers need to learn skills to increase a team's effectiveness. Team members benefit from learning how to actively listen, how to give constructive and positive feedback, how to develop a consensus supporting the team's direction and how to run a team meeting.

- **Is the lawyer's need for autonomy recognized and protected?** Lawyers will function most smoothly if maximum autonomy is maintained within the team. Minimizing the reporting requirements and the number of meetings will allow lawyers the feeling of independence they prefer. When different team members are accorded primary responsibility for aspects of a project, the need for individual recognition is satisfied, while a coordinated attack on the problem is permitted. To promote teamwork, individual performances by each team member must be recognized, evaluated and reinforced through frequent feedback.

- **Has the team recognized the difficulty of team-building?** Acknowledging that lawyers do not easily fit into high-performance teams alerts the participants to the challenges ahead. When it is recognized that achieving the firm's goals with a team of autonomous, highly critical lawyers is inherently difficult, the leader and the team members may be better prepared for obstacles they may encounter.

Teamwork and collaborative problem-solving have been important strategies employed by forward-thinking, successful organizations. Law firms, in adopting these strategies, need to recognize how their organizations and the personalities of lawyers differ from the organizations that pioneered the team models they are studying. Both the objectives of those models and the elements necessary to their success must be carefully tailored to fit the typical lawyer's abilities, aptitudes and personality.

Ms. Allen is the manager of professional services at Denver's Davis, Graham & Stubbs. Ms. Williams is of counsel at the firm.