



BUILDING A CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT

By Meghan Koransky

In January 2025, Gallup reported that employee engagement had sunk to a 10-year low. This report came as no surprise to career experts. They had already dubbed 2025 “the year of Great Detachment.” The pseudonym refers to a record number of employees feeling disengaged, even despondent, about work.

Career experts point to numerous factors fueling employee dissatisfaction, including but not limited to employees feeling overworked, reduced leniency for remote work and support for alternative work arrangements, shifts in roles and responsibilities driven by AI, large-scale organizational disruptions, and general market uncertainty. Unlike the Great Resignation of 2021, which saw workers quit or change careers in droves, workers are staying put albeit dissatisfied and less productive.

Law firms are no exception to this alarming trend. Attorneys and legal staff report increased levels of stress, burnout, and disengagement. The potential impact on firms and employees is staggering. Left unchecked, poor morale can wreak havoc on employee retention and development, client expansion efforts, and firms’ long-term sustainability.

So, what steps can law firm leaders take to cultivate a culture that inspires employees to do their best? Workplace culture expert Dr. Sheila Margolis explains that the first step in employee engagement is assessing whether a job is a good mutual fit. To do so, employees and employers should begin by addressing baseline considerations, such as:

- **Do the pay and benefits meet the employee's needs?**
- **Does the specific legal work the firm handles interest and inspire the employee?**
- **Does the employee feel connected to the law firm's broader mission (e.g., its contribution to clients and the legal community)?**

Responding affirmatively to these and other baseline considerations does not foreshadow employee engagement. It simply means certain preliminary criteria are met, so there may be a fit. As an example, employees will grow unhappy and leave a firm if pay and benefits do not meet their initial needs. Compensation does not need to surpass employees' wildest expectations, but it does need to meet what employees need to live. Skills and interests must also be a fit. To illustrate this, a law firm wishing to grow its appellate law practice needs to attract attorneys with strong research and writing skills. Attorneys without the passion and aptitude for appellate brief writing are unlikely to be happy or successful.

Baseline considerations do not distinguish one law firm from another. Similarly situated firms may offer comparable compensation, have overlapping practice areas, and even target the same types of clients. So, what gives each law firm its unique culture? According

to Dr. Margolis, a law firm's cultural uniqueness is shaped by its leaders' philosophy combined with certain baseline considerations. In other words, a leader's vision, practices, and ideals imbue firms and companies with their *je ne sais quoi*.

Back in college, I worked for a corporate outing facility that adopted Nike's "Just Do It" slogan as its unofficial internal mantra. The company leaders prominently displayed the tagline in its main employee work area. "Just Do It" succinctly captured the leaders' approach to management, which centered around exceptional customer service and employee ownership and accountability. Its clearness and simplicity resonated with the company's college-age summer workforce. It epitomized a culture that inspired trust, ownership, and a can-do attitude.

With an inspiring vision, law firm leaders can begin to create a culture where employees are doing the right work guided by shared practices and principles. It is important that firm leaders focus on creating an environment where all employees feel a sense of connection and belonging. Sometimes law firms unintentionally create two cultures, one for attorneys and another for support staff. This divide weakens collaboration and diminishes morale. To illustrate this, let's consider return to office initiatives. Let's assume a law firm demonstrates leniency with attorneys who wish to work from home but not for corresponding support staff. Differences in the implementation of policy can create an "us" versus "them" mentality and slowly chip away at firm culture.

Law firms that align culture with practices and processes set a tone for a stronger, more united team. It is important that firms routinely review their internal ways of operating and client-facing initiatives to ensure they are aligned with firm values. Let's consider a firm in which leadership's vision is growth through transparency and open communication. Examples of steps to align this vision with practices and processes might include:

-  Consistently communicating the firm's successes, challenges, and overall performance to employees.
-  Providing honest feedback and clear expectations for attorneys and staff.
-  Frequently collecting employee and client feedback and being agile in implementing this feedback.
-  Providing clear and accessible information to clients about their cases, legal processes, and fees.

Even in firms with strong cultural alignment, high employee engagement is not a foregone conclusion. Employee motivation is also shaped by individual needs and preferences. According to Dr. Margolis, engagement improves when leaders spend time understanding which universal engagement factors motivate individual employees. Examples include trust, communication, achievement, a sense of ownership, growth and development opportunities, autonomy, and a caring work environment. To illustrate this, a Gen Z attorney may be motivated less by financial incentives and more by access to growth and development opportunities. Empowering this attorney with opportunities to attend a hearing or take a deposition may be more impactful than financial rewards alone. Employees whose leaders invest in getting to know them and understanding what drives them are likely to feel valued. More often than not, these employees become champions of the firm, sharing their enthusiasm with colleagues, clients, and recruits.

As in life, workplace culture is not stagnant; law firms, employees and clients are continuously evolving. Founding partners retire and new leaders step in to fill their shoes. Practice areas expand and contract. Employees onboard, evolve in their roles, and sometimes transition. These variables add to the complexity. For firms to maintain high levels of engagement, it is critical for leaders to keep their finger on the pulse. This includes staying focused on what's working and where the firm can do better. Leaders should routinely ask themselves, "How often do I listen to employees?" Even more importantly, leaders should be adept in responding to the feedback they receive. By keeping employee engagement top of mind, leaders can build a culture employees feel proud to call "home."

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