

## Law Firm Culture: Understand Before Joining; Embrace to Succeed

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Each law firm has a unique identifying culture. In order to be successful, individual lawyers need to understand the culture of the law firm (or in-house legal department) they are considering – or where they have already landed.

An entity's culture consists of the rules of behavior that direct daily actions in the workplace. These rules can be written or unwritten, intentional or organic. Simply put, culture is the way a law firm does things.

A clearly defined culture lets employees know what is expected of them. It also lets employees know what to expect from the organization. A clearly defined culture provides valuable clues about how to navigate the culture – and achieve success.

"I like to use the image of a bicycle when describing a law firm's culture," said Susan Lintonsmith. "The front wheel is the organization's vision or mission. The handlebars are the strategies used to steer the front wheel. The back wheel provides power and forward momentum. The back wheel is the law firm's culture."

Lintonsmith discussed corporate culture and its application to law firms and legal departments at the monthly educational program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association ([www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain](http://www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain)), held Feb. 14 at Maggiano's Little Italy in downtown Denver.

Lintonsmith is a marketing consultant to Einstein Noah Restaurant Group. She holds an MBA in finance and marketing from Kelley School of Business at Indiana University. Over the past 22 years, she has gained valuable insight into corporate culture from positions with Red Robin Gourmet Burgers, Horizon Organic Dairy for WhiteWave Foods, Western Union, Coca-Cola and Pizza Hut.

"Culture needs constant tending or it will slip," said Lintonsmith. "A few years ago, Starbucks Coffee came to this stark realization. Howard Schultz put it this way: 'We somehow evolved from a culture of entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation to a culture of ... mediocrity and bureaucracy. We have somehow lost our edge.' Because of this realization, Starbucks was able to stop its slide and regain momentum."

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## ***Understand the culture before you take the job***

“Traditionally, the culture of any organization is set by its leaders – whether enlightened, extreme workaholics, or somewhere in between,” said LintonSmith. “Problems can arise when a leader comes from a different generation than others within the organization. Boomers – born between 1946 and 1964 – occupy many leadership positions.

“Boomers are workaholics who *live to work* and feel rewarded by money and titles,” said LintonSmith. “Members of Gen X and Gen Y *work to live* and find their rewards in freedom, flexibility and meaningful work. There are differences in use of technology, communication style and even work attire.

“Boomers, for example, grew up before computers,” said LintonSmith. “They learned how to use computers, got used to them, and now spend much of their work day at the office in front of their desks. Gen X grew up with computers; Gen Y grew up with laptops, smart phones and other portable technology. As a result, Gen X and Gen Y are perfectly comfortable working “in the cloud” from any location – not just the office.

“Given these differences,” said LintonSmith, “it takes real insight for leadership to forge and maintain a meaningful culture that motivates all of a law firm’s generations.”

Do your research before accepting any new position. “Ask yourself hard questions about your personal work ethic, work view and work rewards,” said LintonSmith. “Then, ask the right people (often insiders at or alumni of the potential employer) the right questions about the ethic, view and rewards at this organization.

“Is the culture gossipy and backstabbing, or helpful and supportive?” said LintonSmith. “Does it value individual or team efforts? What are the *real* hours? How much time is spent in meetings? Always remember -- no matter how tempting the job offer, you have many choices. The workplace culture must be as attractive as the job itself.”

## ***Ensure a good fit***

The best cultural fit occurs when an individual understands his or her own motivations. What are your interests? “I have always enjoyed food and eating out,” said LintonSmith, “so it was natural that I would look to the food industry. Lawyers can put their skill set to work in any industry. Look for a firm that works within an industry you find interesting.”

You also need to understand your own values – whether individual, cultural or generational. A person who is structured and process-oriented will succeed best in a structured and process-oriented culture. A creative person thrives to his or her full potential in a creative culture.

“A strong performance culture will value *what* you accomplish rather than *how* you accomplish it,” said LintonSmith. A strong style culture values *how* you do things. A style culture tends to have lots of rituals – like customer-care campaigns and employee recognition events – that clearly communicate these values. Some organizations stress results, others style.

“Once you understand your own interests, values and motivation,” said LintonSmith, “you need to find a professional home where interests, values and firm culture all intersect.”

**Accept, adapt ... or move on**

Lawyers working in an environment that is a bad cultural fit have two options – they can accept the culture and do their best to adapt to it – or they can move on.

“If you try to fight an established workplace culture, you will never win,” said Linton Smith. “Listen and learn, so that you can use the culture to your advantage. Network, build relationships and ask questions about how things are done. Find a mentor. Ask for help. *Never* gossip or complain about the existing culture.”

An established culture, often found in mature organizations, is harder to change than a weak culture, often found in younger organizations.

“The existing culture is created by and important to leadership,” said Linton Smith. “It is more enduring than you are. Intentional, strategic cultural changes can take up to 15 years to execute. Before the culture will change, you will be seen as a ‘bad fit’ and replaced. So if you want to stay and succeed, adapt your attitude. You cannot control the wind, but you can adjust your sails to work with the prevailing wind.”

One difficult cultural challenge takes place when one law firm acquires or is acquired by another – an increasingly common situation in the past year. “The dominant culture is usually the culture of the acquirer,” said Linton Smith. “Do not fight it. Things may be chaotic for a while but, by listening and learning, you can adapt.”

Every law firm or legal department is different – with its own rules, individuals and challenges. Success and satisfaction with your work rests on your ability to understand – and then navigate – the unique workplace culture.

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