

## **Truly engaged employees Lead to highly successful law firms**

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A truly engaged employee is one who believes so strongly in an organization that he or she invests discretionary effort in its success. In other words, a truly engaged employee is someone who regularly goes above and beyond his or her job description.

What does this mean in a law firm? While equity partners (and those on the track to become equity partners) are best thought of as owners rather than employees, everyone else should be considered an employee.

The engaged non-equity track associate involved in document review will notice and point out an interesting new detail. The non-engaged counterpart could ignore this detail, because it might make the job more difficult.

The engaged paralegal or legal assistant will cheerfully work evenings and weekends as a courtroom date draws near. The non-engaged employee will complain and sulk.

The engaged mail room person will deliver a registered letter to a lawyer as soon as it arrives, allowing for timely consideration and response. The non-engaged employee will wait until the next scheduled delivery cycle.

And finally, the engaged marketing director/manager/support person will devote extra time and effort to creating a truly customized client proposal, rather than simply answering RFP questions with the usual non-specific content.

In addition, employee engagement is not limited to the workplace. An engaged employee will rave about his or her law firm outside the office as well -- whether to neighbors on the sidewalk, fellow parents at a soccer game, or someone they meet at book club or a cocktail party.

When you consider these examples, it is easy to see how truly engaged employees can propel law firms from run-of-the-mill to highly successful. “Defining and

communicating the unique story or message at the heart of your law firm is essential to employee engagement,” said Laura Wegscheid.

Wegscheid discussed why law firms should enhance employee engagement in order to improve morale, operations and the bottom line. This presentation to the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association ([www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain](http://www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain)) took place Sept. 13 at Fogo de Chao Restaurant in Lower Downtown Denver.

Wegscheid is a senior consultant with Cast Communication Design ([www.castcommunicationdesign.com](http://www.castcommunicationdesign.com)), an internal communications consulting firm focused on helping businesses engage and align their employees.

### *The value of engaged employees*

Modern research organizations use rigorous science to assess levels of employee engagement and link engagement to performance.

In 2009, Hewitt discovered that businesses with highly engaged employees have total shareholder return 19 percent higher than firms with average engagement.

According to a study of a large professional services firm by the Hay Group, the firm’s five most-engaged regional offices generated 43 percent more revenue per consultant (think lawyer) than the firm’s five least-engaged offices.

“According to Colorado Bar Association statistics,” said Wegscheid, “the average attorney has \$446,500 in billable per year. A 43 percent increase adds an additional \$191,995 to this amount, for a total of \$638,495 per lawyer. That translates into \$1.9 million extra for a firm of 10 attorneys, \$3.8 million for 20 attorneys and \$5.8 million for 30 attorneys. This is a lot of money.”

Research clearly demonstrates that the more engaged your employees, the better your revenue, productivity, earnings, shareholder returns, employee retention and customer loyalty.

According to Gallup, about 16 percent of employees at any business are actively disengaged. “Some call these people ‘CAVE dwellers,’ for ‘consistently against virtually everything,’” said Wegscheid. “They will actively try to destroy your organization.

“An additional 29 percent truly believe in your business and are actively engaged in making it succeed,” said Wegscheid. “That leaves the majority of your employees -- approximately 55 percent -- who are neither disengaged nor engaged. Smart businesses focus on transforming these ‘neutrals’ into highly engaged employees.”

## *How to encourage employee engagement*

Good internal communication is one of the best ways to move employees out of the middle and into the “high engagement” zone.

“Internal communication is evolving,” said Wegscheid, “with the balance shifting from a model weighted by formality and control towards a model that facilitates employee engagement. Few organizations fall squarely into one of these four models.”

The **inner circle** model has the highest level of formality/control and the lowest level of employee engagement. Executives confer behind closed doors with no employee input. Information travels through formal channels from the top down to managers, who tell employees *what* to do – but not *why*. “Most, but not all, organizations have moved beyond this model,” said Wegscheid.

The **cascade** model is still quite controlled, but has a little more employee engagement. Decisions are made at the top and information flows from the top down, but managers are expected to share some information with their teams.

In the **dialogue** model, decisions and information still flow from the top – but are often accompanied by an invitation to ask questions. Feedback is limited to topics raised by leadership. The process is formal, but two-way, with the goal of making sure employees understand the information that was communicated.

“Most organizations, including law firms, currently operate at the cascade level and perhaps at the dialogue level,” said Wegscheid.

The **community** model combines the highest levels of employee engagement with informality and freedom of expression. “This model shares a mindset with social media,” said Wegscheid. “Knowledge is not controlled at the top, but contributed by and commented on by all participants in a network. Everyone has something to contribute.”

In the community model, leadership is still needed but messages can be initiated by anyone, encouraging the free flow of information throughout an organization. In this model, individuals feel comfortable sharing expertise and learning from each other, which results in spontaneous collaboration by employees at all levels to solve a problem, rather than formal teams composed only of executives. Employees as well as owners feel invested in the results.

“Because of sensitive information, proprietary relationships and a billable hour model that does not reward efficiency, the community model can be challenging for law firms,” said Wegscheid. “However, there are elements of this model that can be incorporated.

Engaged employees are those who understand and believe in a law firm’s message. This message can be created at the top and then delivered formally to employees (a low-engagement model). Conversely, it can be created collaboratively (with facilitation by

firm leaders) and made part of an ongoing conversation among employees (a high-engagement model). Or it can be somewhere in between.

“The important thing,” said Wegscheid, “is to understand the value of employee engagement and actively consider which steps your firm can take to improve it – and consequently improve the firm’s bottom line.”