

A Cynical View of Law Firm Values

Do law firms really have the values they proudly describe on their websites?

By Nick Jarrett-Kerr

Before the advent of marketing departments, websites and branding advisers, law firms rarely thought about their organisational values. Now, virtually every law firm proudly trumpets a set of so-called unique and compelling values on their website and in their literature. And yet, when you talk to law firm partners about their firms values, many can barely remember even one of them, and others will tell you that the list was drawn up by the marketing department when the firm last re-branded.

I have been fond of saying that law firms often demonstrate as many different strategies as they have partners. It is a bit the same with values as these tend to be individually held rather than organisationally embedded. This is because our values comprise those unconscious, deeply held inner beliefs that we all hold as individuals, that we take for granted but that underpin our attitudes and behaviours. Not only is it difficult to define a law firm's shared values, it is equally problematic to make them relevant in every day life. And as for managing by reference to those values, just forget it unless you gravitate to many lawyer's hidden idol - the pursuit of money and the adoration of the billable hour. One problem of course is that law firms are very difficult to differentiate one from the other in many areas including the areas of values. It seems to be hard to be unique (in ways which clients and staff will find compelling) when it comes to describing the firm's culture and ethos.

There is of course a world of difference between culture and values although there is a connection and overlap between the two. One can of course take a look at different law firms and from the outside describe them variously as aggressive or dozy, sharp or cosy, arrogant or understated, flexible or rigid, hungry or complacent, and from those descriptions something can be discerned about both the firms culture and it's underlying values.

There must be some law firms out there who have worked hard on their shared set of values, whose ethos is reflected in every day behaviours and whose espoused values are matched by a degree of reality. Please email me if you think that yours is such a firm.

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