

Innovation at Law Firm Retreats

Putting attorney creativity to work with Innovation Tournaments

by David Cruickshank

Law firms are often criticized as being late to innovate, if at all. As I discovered at a recent law firm retreat, the creativity and willingness to innovate resides in the attorneys. It just takes a structure and leadership to unlock. The retreat environment is an ideal setting for an Innovation Tournament.

Innovation Tournaments began as a business-school structure for promoting creative business ideas. I had the opportunity to help a Canadian firm structure and run a tournament at a retreat - a first for law firm retreats as far as we know.

What is an Innovation Tournament?

An Innovation Tournament is a cross between intensive brainstorming, creative arts and *American Idol*. Let me explain. The tournament takes about five hours of retreat time, including some lunch and coffee breaks. It works best when you have the facilities and numbers to have groups of 14 to 16 that will meet separately at first.

Groups are assigned a category of law firm activity - business development, client service improvements, associate development, etc. In our first tournament, we had six broad topics and four to five groups per topic. Each group was asked, in a limited time, to come up with an innovation, consistent with firm strategy, that would be most attractive to their colleagues. Then the tournament "rounds" begin.

Presentation Rounds

Each group gets a piece of flip chart paper. Here is where the creative drawing and chart-making emerges. One or two presenters are selected to present the innovation to other groups working in the same category. A strict three-minute presentation time rule prevails. The skill, humor, and camaraderie exhibited during this phase is unlike anything I have seen at other retreats. As an outside leader, it was important to keep momentum and be the impartial moderator, coach and referee of the process.

Building to the Final Round

After a couple of rounds of selecting and improving on innovations, the tournament builds to a final round. From each of the six categories, after secret balloting, a winning innovation is chosen. The winners again get to "poster" their idea and work on a presentation. During a coffee break, all retreat attendees circulate amid the posters of the category winners.

Then all come to a single large room for the *American Idol* finals. Again, the three-minute speeches were brilliant, and the ideas were within reach of the firm. (Impractical and very expensive ideas did not get enough votes.) This time, the best innovation for the entire firm was on the line. The final presentation round takes just over 30 minutes, followed by secret ballots. (No obnoxious judges are present.) At the retreat dinner, the winning idea and group is announced and given a prize.

The Payoff

The firm in this case created more than 30 ideas, many of them quite viable and some that attracted the voting support of up to half the lawyers present. The competition and speed of the

tournament prevented ideas from being debated to death. Often, senior associates or junior partners were given the presentation role - and were able to showcase previously unknown skills.

Above all, the whole process advanced the firm's strategy and demonstrated that the motivation to innovate resides in firms - it just needs a structure and leadership to unlock. In planning your next retreat, talk to us about Innovation Tournaments.

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