

## SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIC PLANNING REQUIRES SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIC PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

Gary B. Fiebert, Partner

Earlier this year – as we have done for the past several years – Smock Law Firm Consultants (SLFC) conducted our annual survey of law firm leaders to assess the results of 2011, expectations for 2012 and to report on the longer term trends we see in the legal marketplace. The results of our analysis of the survey findings were reported in our Monograph, entitled *“The Doldrums—Cautious Optimism Mixed With More Than A Little Uncertainty For The Second Year In A Row.”*

As we thought further about these results, and as we discussed them with law firm managing partners (CEO’s) and Executive Directors (COO’s) around the country, we realized that one overarching theme of the results of that survey was the widely held perception by legal managers that the development and implementation of law firm strategic plans was less than fully effective, even to the point that some felt that their strategic plans had *“failed.”*

It is important to note here that strategic planning is a concept and concepts – by themselves – cannot fail. Organizations fail; leaders and managers fail. Strategic planning is a relatively new tool in law firms that has slowly, but effectively spread throughout the industry over the last 10 to 20 years.

- But many of the law firms that have embraced the strategic planning concept are significantly older than the life of this concept. And, we all know how adverse to change lawyers can be.
- So as this concept caught on (and especially during the boom years pre-2008), people embraced the power and potential impact of planning techniques and not the necessary upgrading of the law firm’s ability to effectively use them.
- As a result – even if the plans developed through the strategic planning process were well conceived, built on a strong foundation of rigorous and honest self-analysis, and ensured that every tactical program tracked back to a strategy to be implemented and an objective to be achieved – all too frequently, the final perception was that the plan failed.

The purpose of this monograph is to help you recognize that strategic plans are never wrong—it’s just that the real world always turns out a bit or a lot differently. Law firm managements’ must be able to use their plans to understand the impact of those real world differences on their priorities – and, to use those differences to decide if they want to revise their strategies or timetables or adjust their expectations of the desired outcomes.

In order to make the law firm’s planning process and resultant strategies more effective, we first want to remind everyone of some of the most common roadblocks to success – all avoidable. These include a **failure** to do the following.

1. Integrate disciplines during planning resulting in plans that conflict with the overall goals of the law firm.
2. Recognize that planning is part of every manager’s job, regardless of the area or discipline being managed.
3. Understand that planning is a continuous process and not just a point in time, such as something done in the third week of September every year.

4. Recognize that planning is an iterative process but not a continuous do-loop. The practice of law and the business of the firm must proceed during planning cycles and, yes, those darn clients get in the way.
5. Establish a method for preparing current forecasts and not change the plans throughout the year to reflect current information.
6. Recognize real-world differences for what they are and failing to use the plans to understand those differences.
7. Maintain an adequate monitoring, control and feedback system to identify progress, or delays, real world differences or successes, when they occur – and even if such a process exists, failure to assign responsibility for managing it.
8. Understand that planning is not a panacea – the very act of planning does not make problems go away.
9. Understand that the knowledge gained during planning is lost if the monitoring and control systems are inadequate.

There are two basic concepts that we think law firms must embrace if the planning process and the plans they produce, are to have a reasonable chance of being viewed as successful.

#### **Keep It Simple, Stupid**

The first concept is KISS, or “*Keep It Simple, Stupid.*” Doing so ensures that the law firm will not attempt a program of change that is either too ambitious in scope or more sophisticated than the firm’s stakeholders and/or culture can absorb. This is particularly important for tactical programs in the firm’s practice areas.

#### **Logical Consistency**

The second concept is that strategic plans need to be logically consistent. This helps ensure that the plans that are ultimately implemented will be either capitalizing on a strength of the firm or correcting a weakness or deficiency in the firm. Too often, law firms develop and even attempt to implement plans that have no relationship to the strengths and weaknesses identified during the SWOT Analysis phase of the planning process.

Additionally, many plans fail to establish the milestones of change that provide the logical links from one stage to the next. Such incomplete plans make it virtually impossible for firm management to know when it has achieved, or failed to achieve, a particular set of goals.

In our view, the inadequacy of the implementation process (i.e. – the art of making change happen), is another key roadblock to success. Like other great art forms, implementation requires a special set of innate skills and abilities as well as a foundation in logic. Unfortunately, many law firms are clumsy, confused and ill-prepared when it comes to implementation. Responsibility and accountability are poorly defined. The organizational structure of the firm does not support the objectives of the business going forward and policies and compensation systems frequently conflict with the goals and objectives of the plan. Also, managers and practice leaders assigned to make change happen are not prepared to deal with the resistance they get from others in the organization.

As obvious as most these points appear, law firms rarely acknowledge them as the reasons for a failed new practice group, or an expansion or acquisition that didn’t work. They continue to blame the economy, politics, competition, credit markets, capital markets and other forces beyond their control.

Successful implementation begins with the realization that the planning process has not stopped when the strategic plan is approved by management – in fact, it is only beginning. Implementation must also be planned and typically involves the following components:

1. Defining the events that must occur
2. Defining the expected end-products that are required

3. Defining the specific tasks that must be performed to accomplish the events and/or prepare the end-products
4. Identifying and assigning roles and responsibilities for everyone involved in the implementation
5. Establishing deadlines and major milestones to provide management with a basis for monitoring progress.

Whether you are trying to launch a new practice group, or a new organizational structure, or a combination of two firms, or new procedures and systems, it is imperative that you remember that implementation, like planning, requires a process and not a single point in time. Equally important is to involve the people who will be affected by the change in the process of making the change happen. This will help to overcome resistance and gain buy-in and ownership of the change by all involved. Remember that in most organizations, change is an unnatural act and people do not like unnatural acts. Be prepared to handle the resistance you will receive.

Lastly, do not forget KISS (i.e. – *“Keep It Simple, Stupid”*). Said another way, do not bite off more than you can chew. If you approach implementation in small, manageable bites, you will avoid indigestion.

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Smock Law Firm Consultants assists law firms in developing and implementing strategic plans. We employ our industry leading methodology (FOCUS) in developing these strategic plans and a variety of interactive approaches to ensure successful implementation.

If your planning process or your implementation process is not achieving the expected results, please give us a call. We would be happy to discuss with you how our collective more than 160 years of experience (in our four partners) helps make change happen and can add value to your firm.