

# EXCELLENCE IN PRACTICE



In her latest article Elizabeth McManus looks at the question - *Excellence in Practice - is it worth it?* - and some of our clients talk about how they make it happen.

## What does excellence in practice mean?

- Delivering high quality of work, profitably, via motivated teams.
- A culture where seeking excellence is a normal part of everyday life.
- Being excellent in the detail as well as in the strategy.

## What's the client's perspective?

Whether your clients are commercial or private client, their evaluation of you is likely to focus on 2 main areas and these are where the majority of your attention is directed. These are:

**Perception of value.** What am I getting for my money? We know that legal services aren't a pleasure purchase! There's an interesting piece of research that showed that

when customers hear words like "helpful" and "useful to you", they actually rate the service they receive more highly than when they don't hear these words. Something to consider when you're coaching and training people in how they communicate with clients.

**Perception of relationship.** People buy people. The market's full of lawyers. Most of them are probably pretty good! Arguably the only real differentiator your firm has is you and your people. Client care, client service and the customer experience are more important than ever now. How smooth can you make your customer's experience with you?

**How can you create and encourage excellence? 6 practical steps to take.**

- Give inspiring and robust leadership. Think long term not just immediate. You're aiming not just to survive but to thrive.
- Develop a clear vision for the firm, making sure you have a unified view from the partnership. Give your partners the time and welcome the debates that might form part of the process by which all the partners can influence the vision. Decide what kind of firm you want to be. Refine your description so it's clear and comprehensible, easy for you to put across to people and easy for clients to get a grip on.

- Communicate it to everyone in the firm with enthusiasm and energy.
- Partners and seniors - show in your behaviour that you mean it
- Measure results.
- Develop your people's behaviours as well as their skills

**Why do it – especially now when cash is so tight? 6 reasons why continuing to invest in being excellent still makes business sense in tough times.**

### **Sustainability**

To stay in business over the long term calls for something special. Building your practice on a foundation of excellence creates something capable of withstanding tough trading conditions in the short term and having the momentum to innovate ready for the future upturn.

### **Profitability**

Make resources count by working efficiently and managing profit margins. The smarter your working methods the better. So what's the difference between the good and the excellent when it comes down to getting work done in the most profitable way possible?

### **Reputation**

Who doesn't want to do business with a firm with a reputation for excellence? Even where a market is price sensitive, there will be a power in being the best or among the best. In so far as you can influence your reputation through your firm's handling of its clients and its employees, you can influence your business results.

### **Retention**

The tougher times are, the more you will want to keep your best performers. In any hard economic period, one of the risks can be that you lose the people you want to keep while the people you could manage without sit tight! High performers

want to be in a climate of excellence and to know that whilst you might be looking at costs more closely than ever, that doesn't mean compromise on how you treat your people.

### **Recruitment**

Your goal is for the best people to want to join you. Being a desirable employer has become more important than ever. Even where jobs are in short supply, the best candidates will always have some element of choice. How you treat your people says something about you. If it's saying something good, you've doing yourself a huge favour.

### **Succession**

Growing the future of your firm means having the right people at the right stage of growth at the right time. Working collaboratively with your fee-earners and associates on their development so that they can see a future and their place in it. Give everyone who works for you has the chance to think about and talk about their careers. Build, by the attitude of the partners, a culture where people know they matter. That way, you create the best possible chance to exchange the information you need in order to plan people into your succession. You'll also increase the chances that people who do leave will leave saying good things about your firm. Fee earners at all levels want to feel that their career has value. The more powerfully you can recognize and acknowledge people's career stages and aspirations, the more powerful your ability to match them to the right role in your future business.

Listen to these perspectives from 3 firms who are investing in excellence and finding the benefits.

### **Simon Smith – Chief Executive – Kester Cunningham John**

**Kester Cunningham John is a diversified regional firm operating out of four sites in East Anglia. The firm has commercial**

**and individual practice areas with a wide range of services.**

**Chief Executive, Simon Smith, says: "The starting point for our firm was to find practical solutions to two distinct projects. First, to agree an aspirational brand for the firm and then understand what was required to 'manage the meaning' of the brand."**

**Partners and staff worked out and tested across the firm a brand statement which says 'KCJ cares passionately for its clients and for the excellence of the services we provide'. Smith says that it was important for the brand to focus on the overall client experience, both technical and non-technical, and essential for this to be underpinned by KCJ's organisational values.**

**The second strand was the Exceptional Client Experience project - what excellence looks like for KCJ. Each of KCJ's 11 business streams has a short, precise and measurable service delivery benchmark covering 8 main areas relevant to clients.**

**According to Simon Smith "It is critical that each benchmark is owned by the team, and not by the firm's management.**

**"We recognised that lawyers do not have the necessary skills to audit their service delivery and we outsource our file auditing programme to Distinctive Partnerships. We use regular, high quality data for each team very successfully to drive up standards. Internal buy-in has been good and teams have become genuinely excited about the audit results, with compliance**

*in virtually every business area now running at 90% or above”.*

*“We’ve completed a virtuous circle of business improvement by linking client feedback to the team benchmarks. This approach, plus a heightened connection to Learning and Development through HR Director Camellia Dighe have helped produce ‘super improvement’ in some teams.”*

*Like other firms, KCJ has had to take some tough decisions during the recession, but overall, it has seen topline fee delivery remain almost wholly stable. Simon Smith says: “I am certain that the work we have put into these projects has played a big part in our success and now, that so much of it is ‘hardwired’ within the practice, we are in much better shape to cope with whatever the post-deregulation environment throws at us”.*

### **Simon Stell – Managing Partner - Last Cawthra Feather**

*We are a regional innovative legal business providing a wide range of legal services across West Yorkshire and beyond. We focus on the client.*

*The recession has resulted in a change in the legal profession. All firms have been affected in some way. This has enhanced competition but also increased opportunities for those who are prepared to change and adapt to the needs of the market and to our customers.*

*The need to adapt is further highlighted by the proposals of*

*new providers of legal services to enter the market place from late 2011. The recent announcement by law firm marketing alliance QualitySolicitors to re-brand some of their membership under the QualitySolicitors name is seen by Professor Stephen Mason, an expert on legal services reform, as a “game changing strategy” which may leave “traditional law firms wondering where their business has gone”.*

*In order to remain competitive law firms need to commit to excellence in the leadership and management of the firm and through the management of the clients’ experience of their services. What sets you apart is how you deliver your services. Clients do not like visiting the lawyer - improve their experience.*

*Law firms need to look at themselves closely and the partners need to be proactive in reviewing and improving their delivery of their services. Too many traditional law firms are delivering their services in the same way they have done for the last ten years or more.*

*We, as legal businesses, need to listen to our clients. Where do they perceive value in our services? Are we concentrating efforts on areas where the client sees little or no value and our time, energy and money is being wasted?*

*Agree how and when you will communicate with the client and adhere to it. As solicitors we lack training in client service and retail and*

*firms neglect this. Those coming into the market will not. They will listen to the customers and deliver the service the customers require cost effectively and in a manner which is acceptable to the customer.*

### **Toni Moore - Managing Director - Adams Moore**

*Adams Moore, established in July 2004 now has six offices over Beds, Bucks, Herts and Northants.*

*Adams Moore’s strategy has been to specialise in Family Law and focus as much on the essential soft skills as our technical expertise. We realise that relationship breakdown is not merely a breach of contract, but is often the most stressful and emotive time in someone’s life. We believe it is important to adopt a more holistic approach to be truly client centred. This includes offering a free counselling service, mediation, collaborative law, liaising and referring to other agencies where helpful.*

*We have a sound knowledge of our local areas and the services that can encourage and empower many of our client’s emotional journey from hurt to hope. This knowledge is mainly based from the various voluntary commitments of the firm.*

*We offer our CPD accredited specialist Family Law training for free, not only to all our own staff, but also to all our local competitors. Some competitors were initially aghast and suspicious of such a maverick*

*approach, but now enjoy regular training and camaraderie with their professional colleagues in a less adversarial setting.*

*We inspire a conviction in all our staff from reception to Managing Director to remain passionate in our belief that we are privileged when a client opens up to us about the most vulnerable aspects of their lives.*

*Adams Moore's growth is a direct result of the commitment of this shared ethos within the staff and our support of each other. The speed of the firm's progression has lent itself to recruiting ambitious movers and shakers who want to break the mould. We are not trapped to conforming to societies stereotypes of the traditional Law firm. We believe we are free, unconstrained as we are unique, setting our own standards, minus the pomp and stuffed shirt.*

