

# The Bucklin . Organization <sup>TM</sup>

## Highlights: Lawfirm “firm culture.”

By Leonard Bucklin

A lot of social science and business science research on “what makes an organization successful in its field” has been done in the last 20 years. The concepts that have developed in the research, and the conclusions based on the research findings, have a core of common statements and conclusions. There is solid information available to the lawyer who wants to improve the performance of his/her law firm, if only to improve his/her own performance, income and reputation in the client or professional community.

If you are a busy lawyer reading this paper, you do not want a ton of research, you want to simply know the basic and proved conclusions. Therefore, as shortly as I can:

First, I'll give you the basic concepts of the cultures of business entities, that apply to law firms. Please understand, from the prospective of social science, or of business science: the term “organization” includes not only a entire law firm, of whatever size. The term “organization” also includes one lawyer with one secretary who work together as a team in any size law firm. That one lawyer and secretary team are, for social science purposes, also an “organization,” albeit a subpart of a larger organization.)

Second, I'll give you the strategies for lawyers to manage, and improve, their law firm by improving the “lawfirm culture.”

### What does the lawfirm's culture DO?

A lawfirm's culture impacts:

1. Employee commitment to the organization,
2. Employee satisfaction,
3. Rates of employee misconduct
4. Employee perceptions of leadership,
5. Employee performance,
6. Organization expenses, and

## 7. Organizational performance in achieving its business objectives.

Generally speaking, everything an employee or executive of a lawfirm does involves a decision. An employee or executive makes what to him/her is a rational decision. That decision is based on his/her understanding of the "right thing" in the organization in which he works. More exactly (remember this phrase):

Everyone makes a rational decision based on the world in which *they think* they live.

You want everyone's understanding of the "right thing" to be the lawfirm values. The lawfirm values are not necessarily the same as the values he/she knows outside the lawfirm — and not necessarily the same as the values of a co-employee or an immediate boss.

A lawfirm's culture is the combination of lawfirm factors which demonstrate and teach its values. Those lawfirm values are the lawfirm "right thing". Those lawfirm values create the world in which the everyone in the lawfirm organization think they live.

The culture of an organization shows everyone (including the outside world): what is the "right thing" in the lawfirm's world; whether doing the "right thing" matters; and that doing the "right thing" is expected.

### **What IS "a law firm culture?"**

The culture of a law firm is found in both the form and the content of the communication within the corporation. The culture (communication) includes:

1. Organizational myths, (The term "myth" is confusing , with its implication of false or supernatural belief. The term "organizational myths" is meant to be a shorthand term for those stories which either concern the history of the lawfirm or explain the lawfirm's social structure.)
2. Existing perceptions,
3. Existing ethics-related attitudes,
- 4.
5. Formal and informal teaching,
6. Ethics program components,
7. Reward and punishment systems, and
8. Decision-making processes in an organization
9. A demonstrated audit of ethics culture. (Auditing what the culture actually is, evaluating what the culture is now, and planing for improvements).

## What should a leader do?

Leaders play the primary role in the creation of an organization's ethical culture and climate. The ability of the lawfirm executives, at the highest level, to promote ethical conduct is critical to employees knowing *what is right in the organization in which they live*, and is critical to employees knowing *how to* make "the right thing" a priority.

Leaders must:

1. Create "lawfirm values" - that encourage compliance with law and professional standards, but that treat law and professional standards as minimums always followed but which are expected to be exceeded by higher moral or work ethics.
2. Demonstrate the leaders concern for the interests of internal and external stakeholders of the lawfirm.
3. Make the needs of others a business priority.
4. Model and coach, which in turn requires leaders to:
  - a. talk lawfirm vision (not the mission, rather the *vision* of what we will be)
  - b. talk lawfirm values,
  - c. talk ethics as a priority,
  - d. "walk the talk"
  - e. communicate what's happening in the lawfirm (keep people in the loop)  
[This is extremely important for employee morale, even for those that you think would have no interest because they are not involved with the item.],
  - f. encourage thoughtful dissent,
  - g. show them that you care,
  - h. don't sweep problems under the rug,
  - i. celebrate the successes of everyone.
5. Enforce the culture. Each member of the executive team should:
  - a. follow procedure within the lawfirm (be procedurally fair),
  - b. be content fair,
  - c. make the tough calls;
  - d. reward the right people (and do it so all employees know rewards happen); and
  - e. discipline the wrongdoers (and do it so employees know fair discipline happens).

## Conclusion.

We've given you the nutshell of advice. It's up to you to think about it, and do it. It will take time that could be shortcut by a professional consultant (e.g., by having a firm retreat for the lawyers once a year and having an outside consultant lead the

discussion) but you can do it if you will take the time to think it through.

If you want more help, we are available at [www.bucklin.org](http://www.bucklin.org) for those in the 19 midcontinent states which we serve. See <http://www.bucklin.org/states-law-firm-retreat.htm>