

Competing Commitments

Lisa M. Walker Johnson

Walker Clark, LLC

“This would be a great law firm if I could get my partners to do the right thing.”

This is a frequent comment in many law firms, even ones that are otherwise well-managed and successful. It is easy to become frustrated when our colleagues do not perform in ways that are consistent with commitments that they have made.

It is both easy and dangerous to assume that these disappointing failures are the results of “bad attitudes,” lack of integrity, or other negative motivations.

Examining assumptions

These negative assumptions can trap lawyers in a kind of inertia, where they don’t do what they say they want to do.” Even when they can identify the “bad habits” or undermining behaviors, many lawyers continue to do them because of the way they THINK about - and subsequently feel about - those actions.

Here’s an example.

A Managing Partner finds herself with competing commitments as she tries to make decisions on a day to day basis.

On the one hand, she wholeheartedly supports the firm’s expressed commitment to protecting the individuality of each partner’s practice.

She finds that “protecting the individuality of each partner’s practice” currently translates into “you do your thing, I’ll do mine.” She doesn’t even try to manage partner performance any more.

Increasingly she is even ignoring the warning signs that some lawyers, including associates in the firm, are not earning enough to pay their own salaries.

What is causing her to continue to engage in undermining behaviors? What assumptions are reinforcing these obviously unprofitable business practices?

- **Commitment:**

We want to protect the individuality of each partner’s practice.

- **Undermining Behavior:**

Ignoring warning signs about underperformance.

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- **Assumptions:**

If we try to hold each other accountable, it will be uncomfortable.

Disagreements about unmet expectations will interfere with harmony.

Meetings will not be a good investment of our time.

Until this Managing Partner's assumptions can be challenged, understood, and reframed, she will continue to be pulled in different directions by competing commitments that seem to hold her captive.

Competing commitments

The dynamic of these competing commitments can propel or paralyze the transformation process. The tension between them can feel overwhelming at times.

What is the purpose of understanding our competing commitments and their underlying assumptions?

Competing commitments are not a sign of weakness. In fact, the willingness to recognize them and the ability to understand their impact on current behavior is essential to moving forward with improvements to the law firm.

If law firm owners, partners, and associates don't understand the root causes of their individual and collective

inertia, they are unable to overcome ineffective ways of thinking and behaving. This can cause blaming, resentment and negative stress. Understanding competing commitments is, therefore, a necessary tool in implementing a change process in a law firm.

The ability to get "unstuck" or to learn new skills and apply them takes courage, communication and a strong commitment to shared outcomes.

Some lawyers decide to ignore the inconsistencies between what they say they want to have and what they actually do. They find it easier to blame their colleagues, including staff, for slow progress and a lack of "commitment." The environment can soon become tense and stressful. There is a ripple effect that extends to clients and the firm's reputation in the market.

Law firms will not get good results if they merely try to convince each other of the need to change or if they press a lawyer into submission based on a majority opinion. Lawyers do best when they understand where they're heading AND what is holding them back and causing them to engage in unproductive behaviors -- behaviors that undermine the very goals they say they want to achieve.

When lawyers know what is holding them back, they can identify priorities for action

and resolve the issues that are keeping them from doing what they want to do.

What does it take for lawyers to resolve issues of competing commitment?

1. Understand the dynamics of individual and collective commitments.

Commitments are the things that we say are important.

Commitments come from our needs, interests, priorities, and values.

2. Give each other the benefit of the doubt.

We all have competing commitments.

There is no such thing as a good or bad commitment. It is what it is. However, unresolved competing commitments create paralysis.

3. Work together to understand competing commitments that have undesirable consequences for the firm.

4. Test assumptions.

Understand the history of our beliefs.

Look for evidence that raises doubt about the accuracy of assumptions.

Clarify, understand, and experiment with different approaches.

Challenge prejudices.

5. Change ineffective ways of thinking and behaving.

Learn how to discuss what matters most.

Develop skills that contribute to decision-making, leadership, open and honest communication, and trusting relationships and teamwork.

6. Get results.

Setting and achieving group goals with your colleagues, and even sometimes with your clients, encourages future high performance.

Competing commitments are a fact of life in any organization. They can be especially subtle and complicated in law firms. They also can be managed, through frank identification and analysis of them. This usually works best as a group effort, in which people communicate and try to understand better each others competing commitments.

About the author



Lisa M. Walker Johnson is a counseling psychologist and co-founder of Walker Clark, LLC. She can be contacted by telephone at +1.941.322.7077 or e-mail at lwalkerjohnson@walkerclark.com.