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Growing a firm while protecting its values

Growing a boutique law firm requires founders to share control while protecting the values that matter most. Thoughtful hiring, genuine inclusion and a focus on quality work can help preserve culture through growth.

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Growing a boutique law firm means letting go of some control without letting go of what matters. I learned this firsthand while growing a solo practice into a larger firm over the last decade.

It is not always easy for founders accustomed to making every decision themselves. But building a firm that can grow beyond its founder requires sharing authority, bringing in new people and allowing the organization to evolve. In a small or founder-led firm, each move can have an outsized effect on firm culture.

The goal is not to keep everything exactly as it was when the practice began. It is to understand which values are worth protecting and build them into the way the firm hires, manages and works.

Of course, some growth is luck, pure and simple. The luck of finding good people. The luck of being in a niche practice that is growing. Sometimes you're simply in the right place at the right time.

What, other than luck, can help a boutique firm grow without losing what made it work in the first place? Three practices can be particularly important:

1. A commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion
2. Thoughtful hiring decisions
3. A focus on the work itself, not profit

Diversity, equity and inclusion as a core value

In the last few years, DEI has come under attack by people who either don't understand what it means or oppose it for political reasons. True DEI means using fair, job-relevant hiring criteria, treating people equitably and creating a work culture that is not based on cliques. In a boutique firm, cliques can have an outsized impact and culture is felt quickly.

There should not be a political litmus test for working at a firm. When all points of view and identities are respected, relationships and work improve. Firm leaders may have strong political beliefs and identities, but those do not have to determine who they hire or the composition of their teams. People can be who they are without expecting others to be the same.

In other words, "you get to be you."

That means creating a workplace where disrespect of any employee or group is not tolerated. Discussions of politics can be kept off the table in group settings while still allowing discussion of political decisions that affect the work, such as changes affecting the EEOC. The important thing is differentiating between the two.

And diversity is not the same as inclusion. One way to assess inclusion is to look at the informal life of the firm. Are people socializing and building relationships across differences in gender, race, sexual identity and age? In a small workplace, those patterns can reveal whether people genuinely feel they belong.

Hiring decisions and onboarding

In a boutique firm, every hire shapes both the work and the culture.



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An investigations law firm, for example, needs attorneys who can be truly impartial, write clearly without legalese and be good questioners and listeners. That means being curious, kind, compassionate and thorough in interviewing parties and witnesses.

Because those qualities are so important, firms can focus hiring on those abilities rather than relying too heavily on what law school someone attended or how well the candidate can write a brief. The hiring process should be designed to test the qualities that actually matter for the work. For example, a writing exercise can help assess clarity, the ability to see both sides of a story and the ability to reach a well-reasoned factual finding. It is then important to pay attention when a candidate's test raises concerns and avoid overriding the results because a candidate is likable or has strong relevantexperience.

Hand in hand with hiring is onboarding that helps new hires know what is expected, provides mentoring and supports them. The onboarding should allow for flexibility. Sometimes there may be a three-month ramp-up and, other times, much longer. Being sensitive to individual needs rather than expecting everyone to develop on the same timetable builds loyalty and pays off over time.

Firm onboarding should also include opportunities to get to know colleagues and spend time with the group. At its simplest: approach employees with generosity and treat them as you would like to be treated. Employee engagement surveys can help firms understand whether people experience the culture the way leadership hopes they do.

A focus on the work, not the profit

For a solo practitioner or small-firm founder, bringing on anyone who is going to cost money can feel risky. Sometimes that risk can be reduced with a break-even approach, such as hiring someone who can handle both billable and nonbillable work. Other times, some risk is necessary if the firm is going to grow.

It's also important to keep in mind that the firm does not need to maximize profits with each individual on the team. Someone may not be as productive as hoped but may add value in other ways. Keeping that person may leave the firm better off and pay off in the long run.

Over time, profits will come. A firm that concentrates on the quality of the work, the people doing it and the long-term health of the organization is bound to thrive financially, intellectually and emotionally.

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