Creating Effective Law Firm Vision and Mission Statements

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CONSULTING INC

Preventing ‘Lawyer Meltdown’ and Restoring Sanity to the Profession

Creating Effective Law Firm Vision and Mission Statements

I. Introduction to Vision and Mission Statements
Feeling overwhelmed and out of control in your law practice? Don’t let your practice be controlled by problems, emergencies or negativity.

You can decide where you want to go and how you want to get there. How? By creating vision and mission statements that inspire you, move your practice in a specific direction, and let you take control of your practice. Then memorialize your statements in writing, pass them on to the rest of your firm and make sure everyone gets behind them and that they continually inspire you and your firm.

With a mission statement, the firm has a guiding principle against which to measure each of its actions. The firm can begin to craft itself and its business in a more purposeful way; it can create business plans that act as maps to guide the firm to its destination – the attainment of the firm’s vision.

In The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Steven Covey says that all things are created twice – first in the mind and then in reality. Unfortunately, sometimes the ‘first creation’ is really someone else’s creation, rather than our own. If we don’t take responsibility for determining how we want our practice to operate, we empower others to shape our lives and our practices by default.

Writing your vision and mission statements acts as the ‘first creation’ of what your law firm will be like. Another example of a first creation is a blueprint. When you’re building a house, you ascertain what kind of house you want, what it will look like, what style it will be, how many rooms, it has. You create a blueprint before you begin to build the house.

And here’s another example: when you take a trip, you first determine where you want to go and what you want to do – you plan your itinerary before you take the trip.

Why Bother?

• Creating your vision and mission statements puts you in charge of what the future of your practice will look like.

• Writing down your intentions helps clarify and focus not only your thinking, but also your actions
• Establishing the vision and mission helps you identify the projects, clients and activities that will move you toward your firm’s goals

• By pinpointing what’s important, you’ll stop wasting resources on projects that detract from your goals

• Having written vision and mission statements makes it easier to ensure that everyone in the firm is moving in the same direction and understands the firm’s primary aims.

• Establishing your mission requires you to clarify your values. Once you know what’s really important, you can ensure that you’re doing the right things (being effective), not just doing things right (being efficient).

• The vision and mission statements are the touchstone for everything the firm undertakes, from strategic planning, management and practice development to recruiting, hiring and performance evaluations.

Remember that if you’re a law firm associate, it’s still important to create a vision for the future of your legal career and a mission statement that reflects the kind of lawyer you want to be. You have to take control of your own future, or you risk having your legal career determined entirely by others.

Having these written statements can be invaluable when you are evaluating projects to request, clients to pursue, or new job opportunities to consider, whether within your current firm or elsewhere.

What’s stopping you?
What has kept you from creating this written vision and mission in the past?
• No time
• Don’t really believe they have value
• Don’t know how
• Tried it before and it didn’t work
• Fear of getting it ‘wrong’

List your reasons for not taking the time to think through exactly what you want your practice to look like, how you want it to function, and what the core priorities are:
As you go through this workbook, I can’t emphasize enough the importance of actually taking the time to write down your answers, rather than just ‘thinking’ about them and doing the exercises in your head. I guarantee that you will get much more out of this workbook and achieve more clarity about your practice if you write down your answers. And the effectiveness of these exercises will increase even more if you share and talk about your answers with at least one other person.

II. Vision Statements

What is a Vision Statement?
The vision is the statement of what you want your firm to look like in the future. It’s the overall picture of what you are building. It’s your idea of what the completed house will look like. It describes the future of your firm in a way that captures your passion for your business and inspires you.

The vision statement describes not just what you will do, but what you will be in three to five years.

Crafting Your Vision Statement
The vision describes your dream for your practice. Don’t set any limits when you first experiment with your vision statement. Allow yourself to describe your vision expansively to help you see possibilities you might not otherwise recognize.

After you’ve completed your expansive vision, you can edit it down to what you think is realistic or achievable. But remember when editing not to edit out your passion – that which makes you enthusiastic about reaching your vision.

Your vision statement should be specific and include items such as culture, the ‘feel’ and atmosphere of the firm, the intangibles that customers can expect, as well as the ‘harder’ or more tangible aspects of the business, (ex: number of clients, gross profits, number of employees, number of offices, number and types of practice areas, etc.)
Exercise - Go back to your roots
Why did you become a lawyer?
What kind of life did you hope to have as a lawyer?
What did you think practicing law would be like?
What problems did you want to solve?
What intellectual or other challenges were you looking forward to?

Exercise - Create your ideal law firm
Now's the time for you to dream big. If you could make your practice anything you wanted it to be, what would it look like?
Exercise - Write your own vision statement
Now that you’ve dreamed a little and gone back to your roots, think about what you can realistically achieve in three to five years and write your own vision statement. (Don’t forget to stretch yourself a little bit)

Here are some questions to get you started:

Who will your clients be?
What do we want our clients’ experience with us to be like?
What services will you provide your clients?
Why will your clients hire you rather than your competition?

What will the firm be known for?
How will you treat each other, clients, adversaries?
What kind of workplace/firm culture will you have?

What financial goals or milestones will your firm have reached?
Where will you practice?
When will you need more space, different systems, more staff, or more attorneys?

What will your role be in the practice?
Why will you be practicing law?
What will your firm allow you to do with the rest of your life?
What kind of life will your firm support?

What will inspire you?

What will your beliefs and values be and how will they affect your practice?

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

Keep refining your vision until you get a few crystal clear sentences that sum up what it is that you want your firm to look like three to five years from now.
The final step
The final step is always to share your vision with others in your firm, including non-professional staff. If you're a solo, share your vision with your spouse, your mentor, or your best friend. Get their input on what you’ve written. Let them see where you want to take your law firm, and let them be a part of getting you there.
III. Mission Statements

What is a mission statement?
The mission statement describes the firm’s reason for being. It identifies the firm’s clients and market. It pinpoints the firm’s priorities. It illustrates how the firm intends to achieve its vision and how it goes about the practice of law every day. It answers the question, “Why should I hire you to represent me?”

The mission statement is an enduring statement that includes the firm’s priorities and describes the firm’s business. It is a present tense statement (as opposed to the forward-looking vision statement) that sums up the law firm.

Spending the time creating the mission statement and obtaining input from others in the firm enhances ‘buy in’ from the firm, regardless of its size, and establishes a starting point for the firm’s forward progress.

The mission statement can be a powerful tool, both for strengthening the infrastructure of your business and for attracting and keeping the clients you want.

What does the Mission Statement do?
- Defines and guides our purpose and values
- Provides direction/acts as a compass
- Establishes what is really important
- Identifies the character of your firm
- Pinpoints the firm’s business
- Puts you in control by establishing what’s important first – when you’re not distracted by emergencies or emotions
- Educates clients, vendors, employees and others about your firm and the unique services it provides

How Your Mission Statement Helps Clients
Remember that clients always want to know what’s in it for them. Your mission statement looks inward at the firm’s character and conveys the essence of your firm and the way you do business. But it also looks outward at the firm’s clients.

The mission statement helps clients identify themselves by showing them you do business the way they do business. It identifies your clients very specifically and shows how your services benefit them.

If your mission statement inspires you, it will inspire your clients, too.
Crafting Your Mission Statement
Before you can figure out how to get where you’re going, you must start with where you are.

Some questions that can be helpful in assessing where you are include:

- Are all partners in agreement with the essential vision and direction of the firm?
- Do all partners agree on the direction of the firm, the types of clients the firm does and will represent, and the manner in which the clients are serviced?
- Can all partners articulate and agree upon what sets your firm apart from the competition?

Before starting to write the mission statement itself, try this exercise:

Exercise - Are We All On The Same Page?
Have each of the partners in your firm answer the following questions, on their own and in writing.

What are the values and priorities that are ‘non-negotiable’ in our firm?

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Who are the firm’s ideal clients?

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
What services do we provide to those clients?

What value do we provide to our clients?

What makes our firm different from the competition?
What benefits do our services provide for our clients?

What is the firm’s ‘reason for being’?

What are the firm’s core beliefs about the way we do business?

Once everyone has completed the questions, schedule a meeting to compare the answers. Some answers may differ a bit due to differing practice areas, but the essential priorities and core beliefs of the firm must not be in conflict.

This exercise can also be done with other key personnel in your firm, even if those people aren’t partners. How well will your firm be working if your office manager,
billing/collections manager, senior associates or other key personnel have an entirely different idea of the firm’s priorities than the partnership does? Keep in mind that your employees have contacts with clients, potential clients, judges, court personnel, adversaries and referral sources on a daily basis.

Talk about the differences in the answers you receive. Why do they exist? Are there real conflicts here? How can you resolve them? Think about these questions as you complete the rest of this workbook.

Set Yourself Apart
To be effective, the mission statement should be unique to you and your practice and reflect your personality. As you go through the exercises in this workbook, keep in mind what makes your firm stand out from the competition, or how do you want your firm to stand out from the competition.

The problem with many law firm mission statements currently in existence is the same problem lawyers frequently have with their marketing: the focus is on the lawyer, instead of on the client.

The mission statement, just like a good marketing message, must focus on the client – what their problems are, and how your firm solves their problems or meets their needs better or in a different way than your competition does. It’s not about you, it’s about them, and about being of service to them.

Getting Started With The Mission Statement
The mission statement is an enduring statement which includes the following:

- What are the firm’s values?
- What is the firm’s purpose?
- What is the firm’s business? Who do we represent, and how do we help them?

We will consider each of these three prongs of the mission statement separately.

Values
The values expressed in your mission statement emphasize what you are aiming for, what the firm’s core priorities are. They address the firm’s character, the good the firm is trying to achieve. The firm’s essential values ‘trump’ anything else, and they are a key factor in decision-making.

For example, a firm that emphasize responsiveness over completeness will operate differently than a firm that values completeness over all else. A firm that considers the environment to be a primary concern would not choose to represent a business that is involved in illegal dumping of toxic waste.
The values portion of your mission statement also identifies the reason your firm exists, the ultimate result of your work, and how you want your firm to be known.

**Exercise - Imagining Your Own Funeral**

This exercise is adapted from Steven Covey, who encourages us to ‘begin with the end in mind.’ Imagine that you’re at your own funeral. Many people have come out to speak about you and the impressions you made on them during your life.

Think carefully about the perspective each of these people brings to your life and imagine in detail what you would like them to say about you at your funeral. If you’d like to work on your law firm mission statement, imagine that you are attending a party to celebrate a milestone in your firm’s history. Substitute the speakers in parentheses and consider what they would say about your firm:

I would like my spouse (partner) to say:

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_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

I would like my son/daughter (associates/employees) to say:

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

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I would like my boss (clients) to say:

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_____________________________________________________________________________

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_____________________________________________________________________________
I would like my co-worker (colleague/adversary) to say:

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________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

I would like my close friend to say:

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________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Exercise - Roles and Values

Consider the different roles you play in your life:

• Parent
• Child
• Spouse
• Friend
• Professional
• Co-worker
• Boss
• Advocate
• Advisor
• Employee
• Neighbor
• Volunteer
• Teammate

(Add whatever other roles you play in your life – these are just examples)

As you think about the different roles you play in your life, identify the:

• Character traits you exhibit in that role
• Contributions you make in that role
• Achievements and accomplishments in that role
Choose at least three of the roles you play in your life. Try to choose three roles that are very different. Write down the roles, and the character, contributions and achievements you’ve identified.

Exercise - Recognizing themes and repeating values
Review the values exercises. You should begin to see some themes emerge, or some values that are repeated.

1. List those themes and values.
2. Prioritize the top four values or themes from your list. Write one statement about how you will apply each to your family, work community and self.


3. Now return specifically to your law practice and write a statement or two that captures your firm's values, keeping in mind the exercises you just completed.

Remember that your firm's values are in large part a reflection of the values of the individual or individuals that comprise the leadership of the firm. This process may bring to light the painful reality that not all of the firm's key personnel are in agreement with those values.

This may present an unfortunate dilemma for the firm, and one which is difficult to face. Sometimes that means parting ways with some key personnel. But facing this problem and dealing with it head-on is ultimately much better for both the firm and the individuals involved; no one can work for an extended period of time in conflict with their values — it creates stress and brings poor results. It keeps the firm from reaching its goals and causes anxiety in individuals.

Some questions to help you create the value portion of your mission statement:

What are the firm's values?
What is the ultimate result of your work?
Why does the firm exist?
What is most important to the firm?
How do you want the firm to be known?
**Purpose**

The purpose section of your mission statement establishes the firm’s core purpose or reason for being. It identifies the needs the firm seeks to fill and identifies what you are committed to providing to your clients. It identifies a problem or condition to be changed.

The purpose section of the mission statement should also provide some information about the firm’s basic management philosophy and style – does the firm want to be a small, boutique law firm, a large business, a family atmosphere, corporate atmosphere, etc. It can articulate the *way* in which your firm delivers services to its clients.

**Exercise - What is the firm’s Purpose?**

Here are some questions to help you determine the firm’s purpose:

- What is the firm’s core purpose?
- Why did you start your firm or decide on law as a profession?
- What is the ultimate result of your work?
- What is the firm trying to accomplish?
- Do you have or do you want to develop a niche practice?
- Why does your firm exist?
- What makes your firm unique/ how does it stand out from the competition?

Write a statement or two about your firm’s purpose here:

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

**Business**

Your mission statement should also address the business of the firm – the firm’s clients, practice areas and services provided. Keep in mind that if your firm has multiple practice areas, it might make sense to keep your overall firm mission statement more general and craft separate mission statements for the different practice areas.
If your firm is large enough and has several diverse practice areas, your firm mission statement can be more general, but you should have each practice group craft a more specific mission statement for their group. The different mission statements must be able to peacefully coexist, and must share values and a common overall purpose, but the business portion may be very different.

The business portion of your mission statement should be as specific as possible when describing your services, practice areas and clients. This is the part of the mission statement that clients will look to in order to determine whether they ‘fit’ with your firm – to see if you’re talking to them. It needs to be as specific as possible so that your clients and potential clients will feel as if you’re describing them and that you understand them and their problems.

Don’t forget to consider both demographics: do you work with clients from a particular geographical area, income level, gender, etc., and psychographics: your clients’ mindset, philosophy, attitude and values when writing about your clients.

**Exercise - How do we define our firm’s Business?**

Some questions to get you started writing your firm’s business:

- Who are the firm’s clients (psychographics and demographics)?
- What problem, opportunity or need are you trying to address?
- What problems are you helping your clients solve?
- What services do you provide to address your clients’ needs?
- What are your firm’s practice areas?
- Who are the beneficiaries of your work?

Now write a statement or two about your firm’s business here. If necessary, write a separate statement for separate practice areas:

Other people to consider when creating your Mission Statement

Even if you’re the only one in your law firm, there are other people to consider when you’re writing your mission statement. If you’re a solo, your spouse, family, or friends can help – and they will likely be affected by your mission statement.
Just because you don’t have employees doesn’t mean that you don’t have to create ‘buy in.’ As we discussed in the ‘values’ section, everyone in the firm has to understand and be on board with the firm’s mission. They have to adopt it as their own if the firm is going to succeed.

Establishing the vision and mission, writing them down, and sharing them with everyone that works in your firm so that they understand and are inspired by them is essential, and makes your job as a law firm manager that much easier. Even as a solo practitioner, these two statements are important, concrete reminders.

**Putting it all together**

Creating a mission statement is a useful exercise for all firms to focus their efforts, and to ensure that everyone in the firm is on the same page and moving in the same direction. A good mission statement communicates why your firm exists, what it hopes to accomplish and conveys the essence of the firm’s culture, values and business. Writing down the firm’s mission statement focuses everyone on the direction.

**Tips for Writing Your Mission Statement**

- Be specific, but make sure that the mission statement doesn’t become a strategic plan. The mission statement should be an enduring statement of the firm’s identity, but should not contain goals and objectives. The specific goals, objectives and actions to be taken by the firm should be incorporated into a business, marketing and/or action plan, but that should be separate from the mission statement.

- Use ‘we’ to emphasize the firm as a whole, and focus on the firm’s culture and strategies.

- Make it easy to understand – don’t use ‘lawyer-speak.’ Remember, many of your employees are not lawyers, and most (if not all) of your clients are probably non-lawyers!

- Make sure all of your employees can relate to the mission statement. It should inspire all employees to be their best and to work toward a common goal.

- Seek input from all levels of the organization – from the file clerks, receptionists, secretaries, attorneys, paralegals, etc. This creates ‘buy in’ for everyone at the firm, makes them feel a part of the team, and provides different perspectives. Circulate a draft of the mission statement before it is finalized for review and comment.

- After input is received, the mission statement can and should be written by an individual or a small committee composed of individuals sensitive to
the entire firm’s viewpoints, and it should reflect areas of consensus. Do not allow a large group to be involved in the actual writing of the vision and mission statements, as this approach often devolves into nitpicking about comma placement, etc. and accomplishes nothing.

- Set a deadline for completing the mission statement.

**Exercise - Your Completed Mission Statement**

It’s time to put your completed mission statement together. Pull out the individual statements you’ve written about Values, Purpose and Business. Tie them together into one cohesive mission statement.

Your completed mission statement should be no more than a few sentences long. You want it to be comprehensive enough to capture the essence of your firm and the clients it serves, but short enough to be inspiring and easy to read.

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**Here’s a test:**

Remember that we talked earlier about setting yourself apart? Now that you’ve written your mission statement, it’s time to put it to the test.

If you substitute the name any other law firm or lawyer that practices in your area of law in your mission statement, is it still true? If it is, your mission statement is too vague. It needs to be refined some more.

Example: “To provide quality legal services and practical, effective solutions to individuals and businesses at a fair cost with a focus on client satisfaction.”

This is an ineffective and uninspiring mission statement. Why? It doesn’t convey a sense of the firm’s uniqueness or culture. It doesn’t communicate the kind of services the firm provides, to whom they are provided, or how. This mission statement sets forth the bare the minimum level of service which all clients expect their lawyers to provide – effective solutions at a fair price.
How could this mission statement be improved? By including more about the clients – who they are, what their problems are, and how your firm solves them. It could be improved by adding something that conveys how your firm is different than its competition. Adding more about the practice areas or the precise services your firm provides would also give this mission statement more ‘punch.’

The following example was taken from a mission statement posted on an actual firm’s website:

- To provide quality legal services and practical, effective solutions to individuals and businesses at a fair cost with a focus on client satisfaction
- To maintain a fair and pleasant work environment with opportunity for professional fulfillment.
- To be a good business citizen and reasonably contribute to the betterment of our community.
- To provide fair financial compensation to all participants in our law firm.
- To manage our law firm as a continuing, successful enterprise into future generations

Is there anything unique about this mission statement? Can’t every law firm say this about their practice?

This statement doesn’t convey a sense of the firm’s culture, nor does it provide the client or potential client for a ‘feeling’ about the firm, or any idea of the kind of services the firm provides, or how they provide them.

This mission statement gives only the bare the minimum level of service which all clients expect their lawyers to provide. There is nothing in this mission statement which would inspire a client to hire this firm over another firm that does the same kind of work. There is nothing in this mission statement that would inspire the firm itself on an ongoing basis.

**One final step**

When reviewing the mission statement, ask yourself: Does this accurately reflect my understanding of the firm and its business? Can the partnership live up to this? Can the individual attorneys live up to it? Can our staff live up to it? Can we operate by this on a daily basis?

Just as any good trial lawyer knows not to make promises in her opening statement that she can’t keep, so every law firm should beware of crafting a mission statement which the firm is not prepared to act upon and enforce. If you don’t believe your mission statement, why should your client? If the partnership doesn’t believe it, why should your associates and staff?

You must be able to answer the following question in the affirmative:

*Are we willing to measure everything the firm does by our mission statement?*
Don’t get discouraged
A mission statement can take weeks or months to refine and finalize, particularly if your firm is made up of more than just you. Your mission statement should tell the story of your firm, create an image of your practice, and allow clients to identify themselves in what you’re offering. That may take time, but it’s worth it.

What Comes After the Mission Statement? Implementation
In a recent survey I conducted with law firm partners, managing partners and executive committee members, most say that if they have a mission statement, either it isn’t known by everyone in the firm or the firm’s activities aren’t aligned with the firm’s mission. The problem is not the mission statement itself, but in implementing it.

Writing a mission statement will not bring about significant change, or indeed any change at all, by itself. To be most effective, everything the firm does must be based upon and measured against the mission statement. If a client, a project, a charity event, a case, or a method of practicing is not in alignment with the firm’s mission statement, the firm should not pursue it, or they will risk diluting the firm’s identity and power.

If the firm decides to change direction, you must be willing to change the mission statement and communicate this new direction to the entire firm, or risk confusion and ineffectiveness.

How do I put the mission statement into practice?
The mission affects everything the firm does, including:

- Culture
- Types of clients and matters
- Practice areas
- Compensation
- Priorities
- Individual goals
- Law firm goals
- The kind of people the firm recruits/hires
- The manner in which people are trained

The mission guides decision-making. When determining whether to hire or fire, look to the mission statement – what does it say about what the firm values and how individuals within the firm are expected to behave?

When your firm is ready to create action plans, the broad goals and individual objectives which the firm will create are based on the firm’s vision and mission.

It is imperative that your entire partnership and governing structure of your firm believes in and acts upon the vision and mission statements. If you create a
mission and ignore it, you run the risk of further disillusioning your employees and your clients. Believing in and actually implementing the firm’s vision and mission will make a tremendous difference in loyalty and commitment. But people will feel fooled and cheated if you don’t follow through.

**Review and Re-evaluate**

Finally, the firm should periodically evaluate whether the firm is behaving in accordance with the mission statement, and if not, determine why not, and fix it. Just like the captain of the ship must make adjustments to the course and the heading due to wind, currents and other outside factors, you must continually check to ensure your firm isn’t being blown off course.

If you don’t care where you’re going, then you don’t need vision and mission statements. But if you want to create a direction for your firm’s future, and a way of doing business that inspires you, your entire firm, and your clients, creating vision and mission statements are a good place to start.
Are You Making These 7 Mistakes In Your Practice?

Often, legal practitioners reach a certain level of success and then don’t know how to get off the plateau and continue to progress in their practice.

7 Mistakes Lawyers Make In Managing and Marketing Their Practice (And How To Avoid Them) is an audio program for lawyers and law firm managers that want to take their practice to the next level. The program is offered in an easily downloadable mp3 format.

This audio will walk you through 7 of the most common problems faced by legal practitioners and provide you with the ‘fix’ for each one of them.

Here’s what you’ll learn:

- Common mistakes lawyers make that lose them clients every day
- Why so many lawyers no longer enjoy the practice of law
- Tips on how to make networking work for you
- The basics of creating vision and mission statements and why they’re so important
- What kinds of plans every law firm should have and how to implement them
- What stops lawyers from taking their practice to the next level
- How to determine whether your marketing message is making an impact
- What’s so important about tracking results
- What’s missing from most lawyers’ thinking about their practice
- Why it’s important to focus your practice, establish a niche or at least market your practice that way

You’ll hear from lawyers like you who express concerns about everything from marketing and networking to managing a firm with partners that have different management styles. You’ll get practical advice about dealing with those questions and more.

I guarantee you’ll learn something new from this audio.

There’s nothing to lose! Click here or go to


to learn more about the program, and the BONUSES offered with it!