

Midsize Firm COO On Using Emotional Intelligence To Build Productive Teams

Chris McDevitt, COO of MG+M The Law Firm, discusses the importance emotional intelligence to ensure continued success and longevity at law firms. "Using EI to understand the composition of your team and what motivates them builds confidence and productivity," he writes. "Noticing emotional cues such as voice inflection or facial expressions during a video call can help better facilitate the meeting and direct the conversation in a more positive direction."

By Chris McDevitt | January 09, 2023 at 03:49 PM

We are living in a new world with a new set of challenges that cannot be solved solely by the use of data. Today's challenges are relational and personal, requiring solutions rooted in interpersonal dynamics. It is a pivotal time for law firms to understand this shift and adapt accordingly so employees, and ultimately the firm, continue to thrive.

Understanding Emotional Intelligence

One of the principal skills required for success in our modern business landscape is emotional intelligence (EI). I learned about the concept of EI while I was working toward my MBA, and it made an impression that has played a key role in my development as a law firm executive.

To use and implement an EI platform, it's important to know what EI is. Travis Bradberry, author of Emotional Intelligence 2.0, defines it best: "Emotional intelligence is your ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships."

That sounds simple — but it's a less common practice than it should be. Fortunately, unlike IQ, the skills required to grow EI can be developed and are closely interconnected. There are four primary components of EI:

- Self-awareness
- Self-regulation
- Self-motivation
- Social skills

These components help develop empathy, which is crucial in today's business landscape. The Great Recession and the "quiet quitting" movement have shown us that ignoring what is important to employees can be detrimental to all involved parties. With well-being and emotional and mental health at the forefront of important conversations, firm leaders should focus on what is best for the overall health of their employees, which helps solidify the overall health of their organizations.

In addition, employee motivation and engagement is evolving—a 2022 Gallup poll showed that employees are focusing more on purpose than paycheck and striving for career development and satisfaction. The legal industry can be demanding, particularly when talking about expectations for attorneys and hitting hours. But during the pandemic, people realized that they don't have to give up a work-life balance to succeed; they just need to find an employer that shares their values.

Using Emotional Intelligence as a Business Tool

As MG+M's COO, I lead the firm's operational, financial and administrative support functions. While many firms silo these roles off from attorneys, I believe that integrating them builds a collaborative culture and allows people at every level to feel valued and enjoy the shared success of the firm.

When I started at MG+M as the CFO, the firm was in a transition period and did not have a strong professional development plan. It was a fantastic opportunity to pitch EI through the lens of developing people in their careers to help reduce turnover. On my own financial team, I brought in an EI trainer and worked to coach employees, and we had a period of more than three years with zero turnover that I attribute largely to the EI focus. Now, as COO, I have expanded the EI platform across the firm.

In the third year of the pandemic, law firm leaders are still facing issues that affect the bottom line of their organizations. A study by Qualtrics states that employee mental health has declined

since the onset of the pandemic. Employees cited increased anxiety and stress as the top reasons for the decline. This is not entirely surprising; however, these challenges have infiltrated the lives of employees and have the ability to affect productivity.

Using EI as a business tool can help address these mental health challenges by making employees feel connected and engaged. Team leaders should make sure to regularly express appreciation for and acknowledgment of their employees. Attorneys and staff want to know that their contributions are valued—and understanding how they feel valued is also important. Using EI to understand the composition of your team and what motivates them builds confidence and productivity. Noticing emotional cues such as voice inflection or facial expressions during a video call can help better facilitate the meeting and direct the conversation in a more positive direction.

In a professional services industry where fostering strong relationships yields business development success, clients are key recipients of EI tactics. I regularly challenge my team before they are meeting with a client or potential client to exercise humility in listening. This means giving them full attention, making eye contact and engaging by noting follow-up questions to ask when appropriate and without interrupting. Simply being present and paying attention can yield exceptional, long-lasting results. As the old saying goes, we all need to speak less and listen more.

Adoption of EI from the Top

I am fortunate to be part of a midsize firm with a management team that believes its people are its biggest asset. Placing an emphasis on smart, likable and hardworking people has helped the firm grow over the past decade. With the nod from the management team, I have seen EI become a pervasive part of our firm's culture and have given two presentations on the topic, which were some of the most well attended professional development sessions during my time at the firm.

While the adoption of EI in the legal industry is particularly important because the law is a collaborative business that is relationship-driven, EI is also a pillar of diversity, equity and inclusion. By focusing on developing empathy, reducing unconscious bias, creating an inclusive culture and improving mindfulness, more diverse teams form and flourish. Building a culture in which all team members feel valued in their work and have an equal opportunity for success creates a positive and cohesive work environment that attracts and retains diverse talent.

For a firm experiencing tremendous growth, EI can help avoid the traditional “growing pains” that often accompany mergers. It can certainly be a challenge to welcome a large group or firm that has its own culture, but being intentional about building relationships to earn trust goes a long way. Identifying and seeking out people who can champion progress and the new culture is essential for a successful integration and transition—and EI can be a major factor in that process.

A favorite part of my COO role is my involvement with the interview process. Using EI has helped shape the conversations with potential new additions, making the discussion flow more like an introduction than a formal interview. By getting to know people and what motivates them, it is easier to identify candidates whose EI and professional skills will make them a good fit with the firm culture and with their respective teams.

We are living in a new era with new challenges—rather than complain about the changes, it’s time we embrace them and take the opportunity to focus on exercising our emotional intelligence skills and see what remarkable things can happen.

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