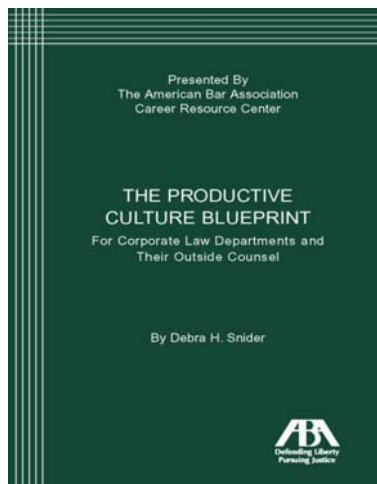


BOOK REVIEW: The Productive Culture Blueprint for corporate law departments and their outside counsel

Author: Debra H. Snider.
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Career Resource Center.



Wouldn't it be great if your law department were recognized as a valuable corporate asset...? If your legal personnel loved their jobs and felt they were bringing the best of themselves to work...? If your outside counsel firms were strategic partners, delivering incremental bottom line value to the company ...?"

Sounds good, doesn't it? Snider makes a compelling case that creating what she calls "a productive law department culture" will provide all these results. Snider defines a "productive culture" and explains how a corporate law department can benefit by one. More importantly, she provides a well-thought out model for achieving one.

Snider knows what she is talking about. Having been a partner at a leading national law firm and General Counsel of a Forbes 500 corporation (Heller Financial, now part of GE Capital), she has substantial experience as both a buyer and seller of corporate legal services. As GC of Heller in the 1990's, she led the development and implementation of a "productive culture," meaning this book is a lot more than nice-sounding theory.

She writes:

It is interesting and telling that a great deal of what clients view as highly value-added is traditionally considered non-billable by outside law firms.

Snider offers a well-written, thought provoking set of proposals to fundamentally improve relationships between corporate law departments and their outside counsel, increasing the profitability of both. She presents a five-step program to align in-house legal departments and outside counsel with company strategic values and goals. In the course of the analysis, Snider builds a complete model that covers analysis of appropriate tasks, human resources, strategic partners, and resources to achieve a defined mission.

Insights to Improve Relationship

A major contribution is Snider's insight. She has already accomplished what she is advising the reader to consider. Moreover, the reader is not left trying to figure out how to implement the more esoteric concepts such as "ultimate value." Snider explains how it can be done. If you have a question, chances are Snider anticipates and addresses it.

When she introduces the concept of "strategic partnering" between in-house lawyers and outside counsel, Snider provides a step-by-step analysis that will go a long way toward soothing doubters. She differentiates her definition of strategic partnering from the one shot cost-cutting measures some firms and corporate law departments refer to by the same name.

Of interest is her focus on the win-win scenario for both corporate counsel and law firm supplier. Reading Snider's analysis produces a sense of excitement and expectation that real change may be in the air for law firm-client relationships.

"After developing a "deep and rich understanding of the client's business," says Snider, "the outside law firm is well-positioned not only for significant repeat business, but also to provide other services the client needs and should be willing to pay for."

Snider's work is a worthwhile read for those in management positions, whether in-house, in law firms, government and not-for-profits. While some of the details will change and be more appropriate for one type of organizational structure than another, her overall emphasis on starting with a mission and moving on to adopt vision and other key components of cultural change works in just about any setting.

A particularly valuable aspect is the case study designed to provide insight into how strategic partnering worked at Heller Financial.

If the book has a weakness, perhaps it is not giving enough weight to change aversion that characterizes so many law firms, including some of the most successful. Also, the author's concepts are not trade secrets. Why haven't more firms and corporate legal departments developed the in-depth partnerships that seem to have so much potential?

Chapter 8, "A Not So Modest Proposal for Change," is worth a read by itself.

In it, Snider advocates changing the business model for the legal services industry, so that the focus is placed on client services rather than technical expertise. Snider argues persuasively that such a change would streamline corporate legal services, enrich the relationships between lawyer and client while increasing the profitability of both, and increase the satisfaction level of many currently burned-out, frustrated, unhappy attorneys, both in-house and in law firms.