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Cultivating Law Firm Culture

by Angela Dunne and Susan Ann Koenig

Managing partner Angela Dunne interviews her fellow firm founder Susan Ann Koenig about creating, cultivating, and caring for a culture—even in unprecedented times.

The NSBA thanks Susan for kicking off our 2021-2022 Leadership Academy programming by presenting the 2021 Leadership Academy Opening Retreat!

What do you mean by culture?

Put simply, it's the way people see things and do things, both within the firm and outside of it. It's not written in a personnel manual, but its qualities can be felt throughout. They can be infused, and they can spread.

Law firm culture hasn't always been the focus of discussion. Why should it be?

Culture is crucial because it's the foundation that supports the fulfillment of a firm's mission and the living out of its values. Without a healthy culture, lawyers miss what many went

to law school for—to seek justice, to make a positive difference in the world.

In an unhealthy culture, lawyers experience themselves simply as another cog in the billing machine. We need to challenge our beliefs about what we value. If we want sustainable law firms where associates are inspired to lead instead of leave, we must examine our cultures.

Good law firms lose great lawyers and great support staff every day because of unhealthy cultures. We can do better.

Increasingly, lawyers are less willing to accept some of the past ways our profession has operated. They want more meaning. They want more balance. By adapting our cultures, we can have great client service and profitability while having greater meaning and enjoyment in their lives.

It's also good business. When a firm knows the culture it wants to grow and hires people who are a fit for the culture, the success is more sustainable. There is less turnover because



Angela Dunne



Angela Dunne is the managing partner at Koenig|Dunne and she has practiced family law for over two decades. She is the author of *Patched Up Parenting: A Guide to Co-Parenting* and you can find more of her work on her weekly blog *Doing Divorce: A Thoughtful Discussion About Divorce*. Angela received her juris doctorate from the University of Nebraska College of Law.

Susan Ann Koenig



Susan Ann Koenig is of counsel and coach at the Koenig|Dunne. She also enjoys an encore career as an executive coach, speaker, and writer. Susan is co-author with Angela Dunne of *Divorce in Nebraska: The Legal Process, Your Rights, and What to Expect*. Susan kicked off the 2021-2022 NSBA Leadership Academy and celebrates 40 years of being a member of the Nebraska bar.

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of unhappy employees and more engagement from everyone because they are working at a place that's right for them.

Strong hierarchies have historically been a huge part of law firm cultures. How do you see their part?

Rigid hierarchies cost firms. To maximize the talent of our people, we need the boots on the ground to tell us what's happening that we can't see. We need the innovative ideas of people who have brains wired differently than ours.

Tapping the talent of everyone means empowering others to make more decisions and lead more projects. Your receptionist may have a brilliant idea for delighting clients. Your new associate may know of an app that can increase efficiency for your paralegals. Your paralegal might be the best leader of your next in-house training on trial exhibits.

Everyone may not get a vote, but everyone has a voice. A healthy culture is one where leaders listen attentively.

How do you even know what type of culture your firm wants?

Like all big decisions firm leaders make, it is rooted in your values. We all want to fulfill our ethical duties as lawyers, but *how* do we do it? What's important to us? Firm owners in leadership must decide what they want to be known and remembered for.

Questions can be a good place to start:

What matters to us about how we practice law?

How do we want employees to feel at the start of their day? At the end of it?

What are the qualities that firms you admire demonstrate?

Why would someone choose to work at your firm instead of another good firm?

The clearer you are about your culture, the more quickly you can grow it.

How do you know if a potential hire is a good fit for your culture?

It's essential to be honest. If your firm seriously discourages remote working or loves to have people bring their puppies to the office, be upfront.

Listen to the questions the interviewee asks; they might provide useful information about what's important. Even great legal professionals are not a fit for every great law firm.

How important are understanding generational differences when it comes to developing a firmwide culture?

Understanding the strengths and needs of different generations can be useful, like the longing of millennials to make a difference. But I don't see generational differences as being a barrier. It's more about shared values and a passion for the mission.

Seize opportunities to use the strengths of each individual. Consider pairing a seasoned historian in the firm, who has the depth of perspective, with a creative innovator. Look for opportunities for reverse mentoring, where the younger lawyer may have something to teach the boomer.

By challenging everyone to contribute their unique talents and to appreciate the talents of others, you get the best of all generations. We got that when we supported our partner Angela Lennon to create our online divorce subscription service, *Untie Online*.

What role does culture play in diversity, equity, and inclusion ("DEI")?

The more diverse our firms become, the more our cultures need to adapt to ensure everyone feels not only welcome but included and valued. Lawyers drinking scotch at the end of the day may not work for a group of lawyers getting in their cars ready to pick up children for a soccer game.

Like all businesses, law firms can say they support DEI, but their actions must match. Many law firm leaders have blind spots and need support for seeing where they can do better. Everything from non-gendered restrooms to how you respect MLK Day and Rosh Hashanah influences culture.

What is the role of the managing partner in cultivating culture?

I love hats, and my favorite managing partners wear is "Chief Culture Keeper." You constantly canvass our daily decisions and actions to be aware of the implications on the entire firm. Are we staying true to our stated values? How is this impact morale? What will be the longer-term effect?

You shift between attending to the needs of individuals and expanding your perspective to look at the big picture. You understand that what impacts a single person can impact the whole.

Each person at the firm knows you care about them wholeheartedly because you show it every day.

To provide some background, how would you describe the culture at our firm?

Our culture is grounded in our values of excellence, support, integrity and "always team". We give stellar care to our clients and to our coworkers. We have a "grit, growth, and grace" culture. We have high expectations, challenge each person to continuously grow, and do all we can to support one another to do this as much as possible.

Ongoing feedback is a firm expectation so everyone can be their best. We consider courageous conversations essential. Support is an everyday word. We all understand the role each person plays in fulfilling the firm's mission.

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Can you give some examples of how this is done?

We talk about our values in meetings. We build trust by sharing our mistakes.

Along with mentoring, we have Monday Morning Check Ins (where every Monday morning, our team members come together for 15 minutes to forecast their respective work weeks to maximize support for all), all-firm staff meetings, trainings, and individual coaching for all.

Developing people takes a lot of time. How does that impact profitability?

Investing in our people both as individuals and as a team has increased our profitability.

Again, a firm's culture is based on its values. Do you value your people being happy and healthy? Do you value your lawyers being inspired to serve their clients?

A healthy culture includes financial stability and having all employees be well compensated. Investing time is investing money. It's a question of what you value. Some things are priceless.

What role did culture play in responding to the pandemic for our firm?

A big one. One of our coworkers was exposed to Patient 1 in Nebraska—the first person diagnosed with COVID-19. We had to act at once.

Taking excellent care of not only our clients but our coworkers is a top priority, so decision-making focused on safety was easy. We immediately shifted to remote work options and numerous safety protocols.

We strive to give our team the tools they need to do their job with as much ease as possible. Thus, we already had the technology (including iPads for all) in place that was needed to support people working from home.

The strength of our relationships with one another meant employees trusted that the partners would take care of them, and we trusted everyone in the firm to take care of our clients.

What worked to sustain the culture with most of your people working from home?

We were clear we were not working during a pandemic; we were living through a pandemic and trying to work.

We did everything we could. We gave paid mental health days. We shortened our office hours. I did more individual check-ins than ever before. We adjusted certain goals. You initiated Wednesday zoom chats with the sole agenda to build relationships and let us laugh together for a half hour each week.

We re-emphasized the importance of support. You asked brave questions about burnout. I started sending weekly coaching tips. Whatever we could do, we did.

Did the pandemic experience affect your perspective on how to preserve your culture?

Our team proved that a hybrid approach to in-office and remote working need not adversely impact client service, productivity, or culture if done with thoughtful intention.


We are still steadfast in our fundamental belief that—for many reasons—we need face-to-face time together. But we've all become more open to creative ways of seeing when and why we need to be together in person.

Where does a lawyer start if they want to strengthen or shift some aspect of their firm's culture?

There's a big difference between being a partner in a small firm and being a new associate at a big one. You need the support of others and until those in leadership roles have buy-in, it's going to be a challenge.

Leaders must live the principles they preach. They can't claim they care and then insist their staff has to work weekend after weekend without reprieve. You have to demonstrate the values of the culture you claim. No slick soundbite will sustain a culture. Lack of integrity will derail any proclaimed intentions you are promoting.

Start the conversations. Be curious about what is valued about the existing culture. Ask questions. *What do you want more of? What do you want less of?* Learn what is getting in the way of making some shifts.

Start where you are. Start small. Start. 

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Write Facts LLC

Since 1991
SANDRA FOOTE
HANDWRITING SPECIALIST/EXAMINER

PHONE: (402) 879-4619
PO BOX 97, SUPERIOR, NE 68978

WEBSITE: WWW.WRITEFACTS.COM
EMAIL: SANDRA@WRITEFACTS.COM

