Develop a “Slurp”

Law Department Management

It is incredibly valuable for legal departments to create and annually update a Strategic Long Range Plan, lovingly referred to as a “slurp” (SLRP). Simplistically, you take the enterprise’s major objectives and develop strategies and tactics for your department to advance each one. This is not

about providing “responsive high-quality legal work” — that’s just the ticket to entry. This is how the department can proactively advance the company’s objectives.

Throughout my career, at every company I have worked for, we have annually developed a SLRP. A small committee of three or four individuals, from different practice areas and experience levels, should create the structure and format to ensure consistency as the plan is developed. This is a great opportunity for individuals to display their leadership potential and abilities within the team and cause them to interact with others outside of their particular practice area. This committee, and others that you may establish, are also chances for attorneys to obtain a broader understanding of the company and what the entire department is working on.

Start with your company’s strategic imperatives or major objectives (most companies have between five and 10). Then have the employees closest to the issues look for creative ways to proactively advance these objectives. Under each strategy, there will be specific tactics to advance that strategy. The tactic level should be clear, specific, and include deadlines. Every tactic should be assigned to a person or team as part of their annual objectives.

Take litigation, for example. Reducing litigation cost would meet the near universal corporate goal to decrease costs or increase profits. On the cost reduction side, how are you working with the business to mitigate risks? Is it possible to improve the efficiency of the litigation process? Implementing early case assessments of all matters, tracking and reporting on status and costs are simple ways to lower litigation cost. And what are you doing to allocate the work to the appropriate levels (which law firms, which attorneys, which paralegals)? Then there also may be tactics that relate to a specific action on a particular dispute. To increase profits, this team should also have a series of strategies and tactics to restrain illegal competition or receive recompense when your company’s rights have been violated.

Another common corporate objective is protecting the assets of shareholders. Developing a series of strategies to protect inventions, intellectual property, and trade secrets can address this goal. Tactics could include filing a certain number of patents or developing and implementing a patent incentive program that rewards finding patentable items within the company. At both StorageTek and MassMutual, we created a patent incentive program that included a reception attended by our CEO and other high-level executives where they presented awards. As a result, even our facilities teams got into the action! They identified and sponsored patents to lift cubes to install carpeting and rolling grout cleaners.

Once the first batch of the ideas is developed, it is valuable to meet with your business partners to discuss and outline the strategies and tactics. They may have input, suggestions, revisions, or additional strategies. They may also help you prioritize the strategies. I have found this process to have a very valuable additional benefit. Your clients will be pleased to know that you are looking for ways to advance them and their business. This will transform legal from a reactive cost center to a team that helps them be successful.

Clear tactics that are observable, measurable, and assigned to employees get accomplished. If you don’t measure it, you don’t get it. If I ask one of my employees to do “good work,” at the end of a year I would probably rate them a “B,” at best. Simplistically, their definition of “good work” is unlikely to be identical to mine. But one of my surprises as a leader is if I ask someone to accomplish 10 specific things — I usually get all 10 — plus two more.

Creating a SLRP has other benefits. It creates clarity and alignment between an individual

employee's daily work and the organization's overall business. For example, a paralegal working on a revision to an ERISA plan will know specifically how that tactic fits into the law department strategy and the enterprise's business objectives.

Another benefit is how it allows various parts of the legal department to understand that they are working together to advance a particular goal. For example, at U S WEST, we were challenged to reduce the regulations on incumbent telecommunication carriers so that we could effectively compete with new entrants that had no or reduced regulations. We developed various regulatory legal strategies: some at the federal level, some at local commissions. We also created litigation strategies to challenge laws or regulations we felt were illegal. We identified advocacy strategies for changing laws and regulations. And finally, we developed public relations strategies to have the public understand the benefits to them of our various advocacy positions. Without such a plan, there would not have been clarity between the various parts of the department on how what they were doing was aligned with other teams. And one of the benefits of having the legal, government relations, public policy, and public relations teams all working under one organization is having four levers to pull to advance an objective. I have often said corporate structure doesn't generally solve integration problems, but at times, it can facilitate the integration.

Your plan should include sections on driving efficiency, reducing cost, and developing your employees. This area could include how outside counsel are selected, rules on billing, diversity initiatives (including establishing a diversity committee), ongoing education initiatives, and use and implementation of new technology (and possibly also a technology committee). Also include internal human resources objectives and tactics. These should focus on advancing diversity, recruiting, interviewing, hiring, promoting, titles, compensation, rewards, town halls, events, driving engagement, etc.

The SLRP will also help you report your department's successes. Toward the end of each calendar year, as results are pulled together, we categorized them under the structure of the SLRP to display how we advanced our business. At the same time, a group (a new committee) was working on developing the next SLRP. I would then hold a town hall meeting with two purposes — to recognize all the team had accomplished in the previous year and to roll out the next SLRP. In the next year's SLRP, I would emphasize certain areas so that everyone would know our significant focus for the upcoming year. I would also outline key tactics we would be pursuing to advance our department. A copy of the results presentation was provided to our business leaders, and at U S WEST, it was also presented to the board.

In corporate America, results don't just happen. But if expectations are clear and aligned with the business, it is amazing what can be accomplished. And remember to reward and recognize your team's great results. As former US President Truman stated, "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."

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