Using A Firm Retreat To Plan For The Next Decade

John W. Olmstead, **MBA, Ph.D, CMC**

The 2000s are here. Is your firm ready for the opportunities and challenges? During this decade major demographic changes will occur as Americans evolve into a different people that are older and more ethnically and racially diverse. As the baby boom generation moves into middle age the following trends will impact the2000s:

- An aging society requiring new products and services.
- Higher levels of savings.
- Key social issues including education, dependent care, aging parents, quality of life, and the environment.
- Increased concerns about health care and retirement.
- Continued shifts in population centers.
- Changing local and global markets.
- Global financial markets.
- Changing governmental regulations.
- Continued decline of the American middle class.
- Demands for new legal service offerings and delivery methods.

Law firms that fail to plan for these demographic changes may find themselves out in the cold and not properly prepared for the future. As the "profit squeeze", competition, and the maturing marketplace for legal services continues, law firms must be on top of every new opportunity and aware of every possible threat in order to survive in the changing 2000s. Markets will be changing in the 2000. Consequently, legal services will also be changing.

A retreat can help your firm prepare for the coming decade and beyond.

The majority of law firms engage in short term (operational) planning. Such a vehicle is fine for day-to-day operational problems but not appropriate for long term strategic issues. **The Firm Retreat** is becoming the most widely used forum being used by law firms to facilitate longer range strategic planning. A firm retreat is a week-end conference of the principals and staff which takes place away from the office usually at a hotel or resort in a rural setting. A retreat differs from the typical firm meeting in that it is a specific structured program with an agenda of topics and procedures agreed to in advance. A retreat is often facilitated by a professional consultant. The purpose of the retreat is to help facilitate change. For example:

- Solving problems.
- Evaluating internal procedures.
- Designing long range plans.
- Formulating marketing plans.
- Determining where the firm is and where it is going.
- Practice Expansion and Diversification.
- Partner Compensation.

A retreat agenda usually incorporates both business and social sessions. A properly conducted retreat can be invaluable to the law firm. However, many firm retreats turn out being a "waste of time" and do not live up to their initial expectations because of the following:

- Attorneys treat the retreat like any other firm meeting.
- Poor planning and preparation.
- Failure to focus on strategic (long term) issues rather than day-to-day operational issues.
- Neglecting to agree upon an agenda, procedural rules, and a retreat coordinator.
- Lack of follow-up and implementation.

Setting up a retreat involves all of the following:

GATHER IDEAS

The first step involves key members getting together to discuss their initial thoughts about the firm, its structure, and its organizational problems to brainstorm for possible topics. Partners and other members of the firm can also provide written suggestions for the agenda. Tentative retreat objectives can be formulated at this time.

PREPARE PRELIMINARY PROGRAM

A preliminary program is formulated. The retreat coordinator develops the preliminary program including tentative:

- Dates
- Times
- Location
- Ground Rules
- Participants
- Agenda

The coordinator works with the consultant, if used, on further defining goals and objectives of the retreat, how it is to be coordinated, and who will be responsible for various functions and activities. The consultant may interview key members to obtain a feel of personalities and needs of the firm. The consultant outlines his own proposed role in the retreat. Coordination checklists and timetables are developed.

A consultant is often used when the retreat will be the firm's first retreat, when partners disagree as to the format and nature of the retreat, when dramatic personal differences exist among partners and progress at the retreat may be hampered, and when a specialist is needed to help the group evaluate objectively.

APPROVE AND FINALIZE PROGRAM

The preliminary program is circulated for comments and suggestions. Changes are accommodated and the finishing touches are put on the program. The partners agree on all details of the agenda and program and the program is finalized.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

The brainstorming process will require background data. Internal data such as firm financial reports, client lists, lawyer productivity reports, etc. and external information such as demographic and census data, information on competitors, business trends, etc. should be compiled and organized into appropriate presentation formats such as transparencies, slides, flip charts, and handouts.

RETREAT FACILITATION

A moderator should be assigned to the retreat. The moderator can be a member of the firm if the firm has a member who can be objective and has the skills to properly facilitate a retreat or the moderator can be an objective outsider who has the requisite skills. The moderator serves as the "tour guide" and keeps the retreat on track, in focus, and provides resource information when required. The moderator should be given the authority to control the retreat and enforce the ground rules.

IMPLEMENTATION OF DECISIONS

A retreat will not be successful unless an implementation plan is formulated during the actual retreat and made a part of the proceeding. Specific assignments and completion dates must be agreed upon during the retreat itself and schedules for reporting on progress must be determined.

At the conclusion of the retreat the outcome of the retreat and the implementation plan should be summarized.

Within two weeks after the conclusion of the retreat a retreat report should be written and distributed to all firm members in attendance. Completion dates should be placed on the firm's docket control system. A retreat follow-up item should be on each and every firm meeting. A post retreat evaluation should be conducted six months after the conclusion of the retreat.

John W. Olmstead, Jr., MBA, Ph.D., CMC, is a Certified Management Consultant and the president of Olmstead & Associates, Legal Management Consultants and Life On Balance. Both firms are based in St. Louis, Missouri. Olmstead & Associates helps law and other professional service firms change and reinvent their practices. The firm provides practice management, coaching, marketing, and technology consulting services. Their coaching program provides attorneys and staff with one-on-one coaching to help them get "unstuck" and move forward, reinventing both themselves and their law practices. Life On Balance helps clients improve work-life balance and improve overall quality of work and life. Work-life coaching, consulting, and speaking services are provided. Founded in 1984, Olmstead & Associates serves clients across the United States ranging in size from 100 professionals to firms with solo practitioners. Dr. Olmstead is the Editor-in-Chief of "The Lawyers Competitive Edge: The Journal of Law Office Economics and Management," published by West Group. He also serves as a member of the Legal Marketing Association (LMA) Research Committee. Dr. Olmstead may be contacted via e-mail at jolmstead@olmsteadassoc.com. Additional articles and information is available at the firm's web sites: www.olmsteadassoc.com and www.lifeonbalance.com.