Many organisations are claiming to be disruptive, innovative and/or collaborative these days—concepts that are rapidly becoming the latest corporate ‘buzz words’. There’s also growing cynicism of organisations that talk about innovation and disruption but fail to translate it into action and real outcomes.

Marque Lawyers’ public mission, ‘Law, Done Differently’, boldly asserts that they are not like other law firms. But have they managed to bring that vision to life and deliver on the promise to clients and staff to be truly different to their competitors and industry peers?

Michael Bradley, Founder & Managing Partner, had a clear vision. Having worked for many years in other law firms, he and a group of colleagues decided to set up their own firm and build a ‘place where people feel happy practising law’. Bradley refers to the legal industry as the ‘most conservative industry on earth’, tightly bound by management practices, rules and processes designed to drive performance, but which ultimately lead to unhappiness in the people who work there.

What is different about Marque?

Bradley notes some founding principles which create the points of difference:

- The traditional time costing model for charging clients is ‘evil’. Marque instead uses either a monthly retainer or fixed fees.
- The team should behave as a collective whole, actively discouraging internal competition.
- Individuals should not be restricted by policies, processes or even the HR department, but trusted to make their own choices.
- Business financials should be transparent, shared with staff to empower them to fully understand their role and impact on the bottom line. Employees should be trusted to make decisions in the best interest of the firm as a whole.

Not all of these differences would sit well within a traditional organisational structure. Marque has differentiated itself from a more traditional ‘command-and-control’ model by building one that is as elastic and transparent as possible—an elasticity that Bradley believes underpins the firm’s ability to grow and thrive in its environment.
Has it worked? Is Marque genuinely different?

Employees and commentators certainly think so. The lawyers we interviewed at Marque said that they work in ‘the best law firm in the world’, and in 2012 Marque was named Australian Law Firm of the Year by both Firm Spy and RollonFriday, two vocal anti-establishment legal industry websites.

Bradley believes he has found a formula that delivers a high level of happiness and balance that works for Marque and its people. The people who work there are connected to each other. The employees we spoke to described the culture as: fun, dynamic and highly connected.

Bradley runs the firm with an open-book and open-door policy. Nothing is off limits, which he believes has enabled the whole team to feel connected to the firm and its achievements. It would be easy to think that a focus on having fun and enjoying life would be at the cost of business performance. However, at Marque they have found that balancing a sense of fun plus transparency of business performance actually drives a collective aspiration to work hard and deliver high performance. This is very different to the traditional method of driving performance by setting billable unit targets and measuring performance in six-minute increments.

Where to from here?

Since inception, the firm has grown from 10 to 40 employees, underpinned by a growing client base and revenue stream to match. Bradley states that his biggest problem isn’t finding new growth opportunities but rather managing a sustainable pace of growth that does not compromise the firm’s values or erode their commitment to the founding principles.

Despite the success that the firm has had with creating a unique operating model that works for both clients and employees, Bradley does not see the current form and shape of the firm as being the final product. Bradley wants to cultivate an open space for change so that the nature and form of the firm can continue to evolve with the people working there, the needs of the collective group and the best interests of the firm and its clients.

What can other organisations learn?

It is possible to be truly disruptive and innovative, even in a traditionally conservative industry. Whether you are a start-up or an existing organisation, what other organisations can learn from Marque is the importance of clearly articulating the desired points of difference in the organisation’s vision and founding principles or values. The differences are then brought to life by the people the organisation attracts and in the day-to-day operations of the organisation.

In this case, consciously cultivating a loose or elastic organisational structure has enabled Marque to operate as a collective whole—governed by trust in one another and transparency of operating information, rather than by rules and procedures. The employees are engaged and the business is performing, as Marque delivers on its founding vision to create a place where law is indeed ‘done differently’.

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