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LAW FIRM BUSINESS

Giving 'No Fear' New Meaning

Cypress LLP eschewed a hierarchical management structure in its efforts to create a harmonious environment, both inside the firm and for its clients.

By Susan McRae
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — Nabil Abu-Assal wants to take the fear out of lawyering — both internally among the firm's lawyers and staff and externally by eliminating the tension inherent in client-lawyer relationships.

Harmony is key to building a bedrock on which everything else depends, said Abu-Assal, managing partner of Cypress LLP, a 13-lawyer litigation and transactional boutique founded in 2008 by defectors of what was then Christensen, Miller, Fink, Jacobs, Glaser, Weil & Shapiro LLP.

"What we're trying to do is use right-brain, left-brain thinking," he said, "the rational side and the emotional, creative side," to create an atmosphere of trust and camaraderie among lawyers and staff and lawyers and clients.

Abu-Assal speaks from experience.

In 23 years of practice, he said he's observed in his previous firm and in other firms the tendency toward a military-style operation with a traditional pyramid structure and managing attorneys and department heads often ruling through intimidation.

So when he launched Cypress with three other Christensen colleagues — Mark Lynch, Robert J. Muller and Brent Bradley, the latter of whom left Christensen five years earlier to serve as general counsel for a private equity firm — he said the experience served as a guide of how not to run a law firm, beginning with eliminating fear at all levels.

It starts, he said, with lawyers getting to know their clients so well that they're solving problems from an analytical standpoint and from an emotional one by understanding the underlying feelings driving the dispute.

"Even our corporate clients are passionate about their business," he said. "It's emotional. It's not enough for lawyers to pretend that they can be distant."

The lawyers use the same holistic approach in dealing with relationships at the office. Eschewing the traditional hierarchical management structure employed by many big firms, the lawyers and staff operate as a team, the lawyers said. They hold weekly lunches, giving



Susan McRae / Daily Journal

Brent Bradley, left, Nabil Abu-Assal, M. Christie Hind, Douglas P. Roy, Caroline H. Mankey and Robert J. Muller in Cypress LLP's offices.

everyone an opportunity to share perspectives and talk about clients.

"We are not greedy and explicitly say that to each other and to people we are about to hire," Abu-Assal said. "The reason is because greed breeds fear. Greed breeds a culture of hierarchy."

The firm's egalitarian attitude is apparent from the minute one enters its doors.

There's a reception area but no receptionist, no barrier between members of the firm and visitors — just walk up to a desk and present yourself.

Another difference is in the decor. The firm periodically transforms its look by displaying a fresh exhibit of art or photography by a client or colleague. Opening-night proceeds are donated to selected charities.

"For our clients who are young, entrepreneurial, entertainment-based, technology-based, they really appreciate that [atmosphere]," said Caroline Mankey, who joined the firm as a partner last year, also from the former Christensen firm. "They don't walk in here and feel like they're in a stuffy law firm with a bunch of people they can't relate to."

Two years ago, the lawyers began holding occasional "Rolodex Nights," mixers that offer clients and other business contacts the opportunity to gather and share ideas and strategies. They said they hit on the concept during a conversation about the popularity and ingenuity of open-source information

opped at least one promising business contact from the affair.

After the event, partner M. Christie Hind, who serves as the firm's innovation strategist, interviewed clients for feedback. Drawing on the responses, the firm is organizing a Peer-to-Peer event for December that will be tailored to a specific group of clients in the same type of business — in this case, technology manufacturers.

"They will be meeting people they don't know, and we'll be meeting people we don't know," said Hind, most recently a law firm development coach before the Cypress partners persuaded her to become part of their team. "It could be these people already have lawyers, and that's OK, because we operate from a very simple principle that there is an abundance.

"There is an abundance of work out there. There is an abundance of creative people. And we're not right for every single company and individual. So this fear, this notion of hoarding, either internally among our lawyers or externally, isn't what we're about."

Then there's the firm's name.

The lawyers spent a lot of time deciding what to call themselves. They wanted something that would set them apart instead of a string of names that changed every time someone left or joined. Abu-Assal said that seven years after joining the Christensen firm, he had lost track of its many name changes. Also, he said, using partner names reinserts the hierarchical notion that they've been working so hard to dispel.

"We wanted to be a firm," he said, "not a bunch of lawyers in a pyramid structure."

Soon after the initial firm name discussion, Bradley and his wife, Ada Berman, the firm's executive director, were driving along a tree-lined road while on vacation in Northern California when she suddenly turned to him with a look of "I've got it" and said, "Cypress."

"I liked it because it was organic," Bradley said. "It identified us in terms of a place. I've lived in California my whole life.

"We'd been dragging around to all these branding experts, and when she said it, it just hit me.

"It was a lucky accident."

Cypress LLP

West Los Angeles

Number of lawyers: 13

Specialty: litigation, transactional, focusing on intellectual property, business services, employment and family law

Tips:

- Create an environment of sharing and teamwork within the firm
- Think of innovative ways you can help your clients benefit their businesses outside of the day-to-day legal representation
- Put clients' names first in contracts, for example, "client-lawyer retainer agreement"

sharing and how it supports business and personal growth. They thought, why not share their private Rolodexes with one another and with their clients? The lawyers spent hours before the events compiling an invitation list and informing clients about other clients they'd like them to meet.

"That was exciting for our clients," Muller said, "because instead of just showing up for an event, getting a name tag, having a glass of wine and wandering around trying to meet people, they already had a purpose in mind."

Muller's client, Ron Vaisbort, vice president and general counsel of Good Technology Inc., a Silicon Valley provider of security applications for mobile devices, said the event exemplifies the firm's innovation and sensitivity to its varied client base. He said he devel-