

BLOG POST

Re-Inventing the Litigation Department: How Bracewell's trial attorneys transformed their practice to better serve their clients

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Creating a new blueprint for Bracewell's litigation department – the firm's largest practice group – became a priority for Stephen Crain when he became firm-wide chair in 2014. Stephen recognized that the needs of corporate legal departments were evolving in response to the demands of their own internal clients. As a result, outside counsel were being tasked to practice with greater efficiency to increase the pace of resolutions while going to greater lengths to control costs. While Bracewell's group of more than 100 trial attorneys had gained national acclaim over the past several decades, Stephen knew that in order to meet these changing demands, his own department would have to transform as well.

"We had grown our litigation practice through several individuals who had built a team around them," Stephen said. "We had pods of trial lawyers who worked exclusively with each other. Sometimes these teams fell along geographic lines. It was successful, but a number of us who came up under this system, the next generation of leadership, looked at it and realized, 'This has gotten us where we are, but it's going to be a constraint.'"

Building a New Model

In order to break down the existing pods that the firm's trial attorneys had grown accustomed to, one of Stephen's first orders of business as the new litigation chair was to move his office to a different floor in Bracewell's Houston headquarters.

"There was some symbolism with the move, but the greater point was I felt it was a necessary way to demonstrate that we needed to mix up our various constituents."

Soon after, the floor plan of the entire litigation group was reshuffled. No longer were attorneys clustered around a single rainmaker, forming litigation subgroups within a larger department. What emerged was, as litigation partner Sean Gorman described it, a flat hierarchy, one in which there are recognizable leaders within the group, but these leaders are considered to be the first among equals.

“We became a litigation boutique inside a law firm,” Stephen said. “By doing this, we were able to more effectively respond to our client needs by reviewing each matter and building custom teams composed of the best people for the job. It also had the additional benefit of providing our attorneys with the empowerment to build their own practices.”

The Benefits of the Boutique Model

Sean echoes Stephen’s sentiments. As a champion of the litigation boutique concept himself, he sees the changes that have been implemented as having the dual benefit of enhancing the quality of individualized client service while fostering a highly positive work environment for the firm’s trial attorneys.

“Something special is happening here,” Sean said. “Law firms can be incredibly competitive places, and that prevents growth. Stephen has removed that burden, creating an upsurge of creativity and productivity.”

By reducing the degree of internal competition among colleagues – an issue nearly all law firm’s deal with – Bracewell’s litigators feel more relaxed and secure. This has led to greater cooperation. No longer are client teams divided in part by geographic lines; client teams now routinely bring in colleagues from other geographic areas, choosing to tap the best lawyer for the job regardless of location.

“When we pitch a company, we take the right group, we bring in the right resources from across the firm, we keep our teams lean, and we’re competitive on price,” Stephen said. “We try to operate as a boutique, so there isn’t a notion among attorneys that, ‘This matter is *my* matter.’ Instead, we involve those people who are most likely to be able to successfully assist the client.”

Bracewell’s litigation group has built tremendous appeal among companies seeking litigation services because of this unique boutique approach. Just like other boutiques, Bracewell’s department places a premium on quality service, teamwork and efficiency. Prospects and clients also view the department as a cohesive collective of experienced talent, rather than several senior partners with supporting junior attorneys.

“We are doing the best we can at promoting the excellence of everyone,” Stephen said. “Our leaders are not possessive about matters, which is contrary to the view of many law firms. We want our young trial lawyers to shine.”

Receiving Recognition from the Industry

Stephen’s vision and his department’s hard work at restructuring itself has paid off. In late June of this year, [**Texas Lawyer named the litigation group the publication’s “Litigation Department of the Year”**](#) among large firms. The honor validates the team’s tactical decision to break down existing silos and, in its place, erect the in-house boutique model.

“There are a lot of litigation practices that operate in a regimented fashion with top-down direction,” Stephen said. “We say once you are hired, and particularly when you are a senior associate status, the expectation is that you are empowered to advance the interests of our clients and the business of our department. It’s been very successful.”