

Quarles & Brady Wants More Attys In 'The Loop' On Feedback

By Emily Sawicki

Law360 (April 21, 2023, 3:31 PM EDT) -- Quarles & Brady LLP has launched a toolbox for its attorneys to more openly share feedback in an effort to better serve clients and develop talent at every career stage.

The Wisconsin-based law firm has expanded well beyond its Midwestern roots — now employing 520 attorneys at 12 offices nationwide — but executive committee member and partner Joe Wilson, who has been at the firm for nearly two decades, told Law360 on Friday that employees were finding it hard to shake "Midwest nice" when it came to sharing constructive criticism.



Joe Wilson

Firm leadership developed the new program alongside design company IDEO with the goal of breaking through the politeness barrier to spark more fruitful communication, feedback and collaboration, or what the firm refers to as "productive interaction."

Called The Loop, the program includes a suite of tools like expectation-setting questions and coaching cards featuring conversation prompts, with a goal of bumping up the frequency of performance conversations from high-stakes annual reviews to low-key daily check-ins.

"The goal of The Loop is to have much more frequent — in fact, daily — conversations about performance," said Wilson, who helped lead The Loop's development.

"Make them bite-size, make them low-consequence," Wilson added. "If you're having regular conversations about small things that went well, small things that could have been done better, we really think that that's a better way to develop talent than saving all feedback for annual or semiannual reviews."

This includes an emphasis not just on management giving feedback to subordinates, but on partners communicating with each other about performance, Wilson said.

"We need to hold each other accountable for delivering the best for our clients that we possibly can, and we need to be comfortable having those conversations," Wilson said.

Some of the discomfort around feedback, firm leaders said, is born from a culture of conflict avoidance that can be prevalent in its hubs in Wisconsin and Chicago.

Wilson emphasized the firm's polite culture is a great thing — to a point.

"There is a bit of 'Midwest nice' to our lawyers, which is a great thing for our relationships with each other, but it can make it difficult to talk to each other about performance, particularly in those situations that arise in any profession where performance doesn't quite meet what we want from our people," Wilson said.

"But, really, this is about recognizing that we hire people into this firm for a reason ... because we think they're a good fit, and they can help us deliver better results for our clients," he continued. "We want them to succeed, and The Loop is really designed to help us better ensure that those people have the information and tools that they need to succeed."

Wilson attributed the firm's willingness to revamp its internal communications to a "really great culture."

"If someone has a good idea, whether it be client service or something to improve the operation of the law firm, we let people pursue that, and that's what happened here," Wilson said, adding that when he and some colleagues first floated the idea for The Loop, management said, "Go do that."

First implemented in January, The Loop's suite of tools are being rolled out throughout 2023, but Wilson said anecdotal evidence points to success already and that the firm's managing partner, Michael Aldana, recently sent him coaching cards asking for feedback.

"The managing partner is asking someone like me for feedback. I take that as a sign both of buy-in throughout the firm and also that people are into this," Wilson said.

--Editing by Gemma Horowitz.