

Modern Setting

By Catherine Calder, Director of Client Care and Martin Dyke, Business Director at Serjeants' Inn Chambers

"We work hard, we get better, we want to help those who want to excel, we want to lead by example and we want to teach: we want to raise the Bar". At a time of change and challenge for the profession, these opening words from Andrew Langdon QC at the 2017 Annual Bar and Young Bar Conference encapsulate the need for the profession to adapt, innovate and improve.



The question is how to steer a set through this process. With over 399 chambers comprising nearly 13,000 self-employed, independently-minded barristers, there can be no perfect, prescribed approach. This article sets out some of the ways in which Serjeants' Inn is facing the future but we appreciate that it is by no means definitive: different solutions will suit different sets.

For Serjeants' Inn, successful management starts with exemplary client service and includes professional leadership, a reflective, self-critical approach, and an emphasis on well-being, a diverse team, modern premises and a commitment to social responsibility. These and other priorities are underpinned by the implementation of a strong strategy to build the business of the set and its individual barristers, which is

now a commonplace - but necessarily confidential - feature of successful sets.

Serjeants' Inn is led by our joint Heads of Chambers, who provide vision and direction. Under their tenure the set has expanded significantly and gained new recognition: since 2015, 14 tenants have joined us - an expansion of more than 25 percent - and we have won over 30 awards and accolades.

We have modernised Chambers' structure through the appointment of a multi-disciplinary management team; this comprises three leaders with different areas of expertise who work closely with one another to give the set a more efficient and client-focused approach. We have retained a Senior Clerk, who manages our operational clerking function, and we have appointed a Business Director and a Director of Client Care. Both are experienced solicitors who have

worked in management roles at the Bar for nearly 20 years.

While many sets have appointed a professional manager as CEO or Director, we are unusual in having a team of three. For us this is essential because, having changed our constitution to provide for the full devolution of managerial and administrative duties to the management team, our barristers expect that team to work without the involvement of a management or similar committee. With greater autonomy comes increased responsibility and a workload that could not practicably be shouldered by one person alone.

Delegation to a management team enables swift and agile action. It increases our profits indirectly (because it releases our barristers to concentrate on their cases and clients)

and directly (through the strategic and commercial skills gained as a result of the appointment of the team).

We aim to create the “*openness to change and continuous improvement*” identified in a recent *Financial Times* Innovative Lawyers Report as being crucial to “*real industry transformation*”. To this end we have undertaken three major consultations in three years and reviewed the findings in a series of workshops, bringing in a range of structural, cultural and technological measures in response. We have also introduced smaller but significant initiatives, such as the facility to leave feedback on each individual barrister and staff web profile. This is in addition to a programme of one-to-one meetings at such intervals as clients prefer – last month the Director of Client Care’s schedule featured 14 visits around the country, including to clients in Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, Oxford and Worcester.

The feedback generated by these different means is invaluable in informing our approach. Our investment in a client care team – unique at the Bar – and a strong staff team overall means that we have the insight and resource to work in partnership with solicitors to support lay clients and build business together. Chambers and clients also benefit from ideas generated by members of staff who serve on the committees of excellent professional associations such as the Institute of Barristers’ Clerks and the Legal Practice Management Association.

A key indicator of success in any organisation is the wellbeing of its team. As one of 21 chambers awarded the new Bar Council Certificate of Recognition for Wellbeing we have adopted the BUPA philosophy: “*wellbeing is not an initiative, it’s about creating a culture and environment where people thrive.*” We have set out to establish an open, supportive culture in Chambers and have introduced measures that include enhanced mentoring arrangements, better communication channels, a wellbeing resource and confidential discussion board on our intranet and

the promotion of numerous schemes, such as free gym membership for staff and an annual ski trip for women who work at the set. In recognition that an individual’s definition of “*thriving*” will often encompass career success, we have also taken specific steps to improve practice development. In the last two QC competitions, six Serjeants’ Inn silks have been appointed.

We are proud to have attracted a balanced team, at least in regard to gender. Four of the silks appointed in the last two years are women and our three current pupils are female. Our staff team is now split 50/50 between men and women, with females in a number of key roles. We are acutely conscious, however, that BAME tenants and staff are under-represented in Chambers. Although two of our last three staff recruits are from BAME backgrounds, we recognise we have more work to do and are actively seeking to redress the imbalance.

Our premises are important. Having moved in 2013 to modern, purpose-designed accommodation in the iconic Lutyens Building on Fleet Street, reducing our footprint by nearly 20 percent, we introduced hot-desking and desk-sharing to facilitate communication and flexible working. We restructured our office last year to give a more economic use of floor space, further reducing costs to Chambers, members and in turn to clients. We also created a single bespoke area to bring all 20 staff together. A flexible office space is vital given our drive to retain and recruit first rate barristers and staff.

Lastly, we have a clear commitment to social responsibility, recognising its significance for both ethical and commercial reasons. Like many other chambers we support Freebar, together with the Free Representation Unit and the Bar Pro Bono Unit as a Friend in Law, as well as a number of other charities and campaigns. We work particularly closely with Spark 21 and First 100 Years, the inclusive and high-profile project celebrating the contribution of women to the legal profession to highlight female role-models for young lawyers. We have supported the initiative not just

financially but also in a practical way, playing an active role in the organisation of many of their events and providing consultancy and advice as well as the use of premises and facilities. In November 2017 we helped to organise and run the Spark 21 Women Leaders in Law conference, which brought our clients, contacts, barristers and staff together for a day of debate featuring The Right Honourable Lord Neuberger of Abbotsbury, The Right Honourable Lady Justice Thirlwall, the Right Honourable Lord Hodge, the CEO of the Fawcett Society, the General Counsels for ASOS and IKEA, the founder of Planet Organic, the lead prosecutor of the Yugoslavian war crimes and the MP for Bristol West, plus Nemone Lethbridge who was called to the Bar in 1956 and now runs a law centre in Stoke Newington in her 80s.

We offer these examples simply as a snapshot of part of the approach which, at present, works for Serjeants’ Inn. Other sets will have alternative, equally effective, methods for managing the unique business model that is a barristers’ chambers. Of course what we all have in common, to quote Andrew Langdon QC once again, is the “*perpetual striv[ing] for excellence*” that characterises the Bar.



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