

A chief asset

Mark Rowlands reports on the value a chief executive can add to a modern set of chambers



The Bar has not generally been renowned as the forefront of management or innovation in the legal profession. However, in the last few years we have seen many sets rapidly evolve and move with the times to keep up with the forever changing and highly competitive legal market. Today, sets are looking at better ways to reflect client needs and approach business in a more strategic way. One of the first changes we have seen in achieving this has been the appointment of a chief executive whose main focus is running and managing the business, leaving members within chambers to get on with what they are best at...law and advocacy.

What does a chief executive do within a chambers?

Chambers are usually governed by a constitution which provides for the administration of the members within the set. The management of chambers is then delegated to a management board; in most instances this comprises the head of chambers, deputy head of chambers, the treasurer, the practice group leaders and the chief executive.

The day-to-day management of chambers is left to the chief executive, who is presented with a varied role, from strategic management all the way through to HR.

The role of a chief executive in chambers can vary from set to set. Generally they have the overall responsibility for:

- ▶ *Business & strategic planning*—a key function of the role is to plan and implement the strategic direction of chambers.
- ▶ *Business development and marketing*—promotion of the chambers as a whole.
- ▶ *Oversee and develop individual practices*—practice development and practice

management of the individual barrister member's practices.

- ▶ *Enhance chambers' profile*—client care management and developing relationships with clients.
- ▶ *Leadership*—developing and promoting chambers' 'brand', such as creating, communicating and implementing chambers' strategy and motivate, manage, and support the staff to maximise their personal contributions.
- ▶ *Effective Management*—with the board, take lead responsibility for staffing, including recruitment, promotion, and grievance and disciplinary matters.
- ▶ *Compliance*—ensuring appropriate compliance and regulation of chambers.
- ▶ *Finance*—financial monitoring, reporting and control as required by the board and in line with the needs of chambers.

What makes a good chief executive?

The Bar has undergone substantial change as a result of the evolution of the legal industry. We are seeing that clients are becoming savvier—not just law firms, but public access clients as well. Many clients are putting huge billing pressure on chambers over how much they are getting for their money. Chambers need to differentiate themselves from the other 398 chambers in England and Wales and offer clients, not just legal advice and advocacy, but extra value (2016 Bar Standards Board statistics). It is a cliché that 'all chambers are the same', but it is a cliché for a reason, and the lack of apparent differentiation between sets means that it is difficult to obtain a competitive advantage.

A good chief executive of a set today needs to have a greater business development understanding, mixed with a strong people and networking ability and

commercial nous to add value to clients.

They also must:

- ▶ demonstrate leadership skills and be in command of the chambers' affairs and maintain the confidence of the management board and clerks. This means both serving them well and gaining and maintaining their confidence;
- ▶ possess exceptional interpersonal skills, to the point where they can influence the commercial awareness of members and clerks. They also need to lead from the front and be influential, not just inside chambers but also outside chambers in front of clients, peers and contemporaries;
- ▶ have strong advocacy skills; as the public face of the chambers, they need to effectively promote its aims;
- ▶ be focused, be consistent and follow up, making sure that the set is on the same page, which is achieved through clarity of communication;
- ▶ macro manage. While it is key to understand the day-to-day activities of chambers and how it all fits together to move chambers forward, it's best not to get dragged into micro-managing clerks, but leave that to the clerks. The chief executive has to rely on a great clerking team, and the relationship between the senior clerk and chief executive needs to be as one on management and strategy issues. Having a strong clerking team, with good client, legal and member knowledge, allows the chief executive to concentrate on devoting more time to focus on strategy, business development, and growing the set; and
- ▶ re-shape chambers' culture and inspire members and staff to new heights. Build the chambers' mosaic—the unique strengths, developmental areas and personality attributes.

The roles and responsibilities of a chief executive will vary from one chambers to another depending on the structure and the size of the chambers. In smaller chambers, the chief executive will probably take on a more 'hands-on' role and in larger sets, he or she will usually only deal with high-level strategy and decision making and delegate tasks to managers etc. However, both are vitally important in ensuring the overall success of the chambers and leading the development and execution of long-term strategies, with the goal of increasing the bottom line year on year.

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