



Credit: Sashkin/Adobe Stock.

This Law Firm Is Ditching Partner and Associate Titles. Will It Improve Team Culture?

"Rob and I aren't kings of the universe. We don't run everything and we certainly don't know everything," says Marbet Lewis of Spiritus Law.

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They are titles that have long been a staple of law firms of all shapes and sizes. But for one boutique firm in Coral Gables, the hierarchical divide created by “partner” and “associate” might just be a hindrance.

Alcohol law firm Spiritus Law has announced it’s shedding the traditional titles of partner and associate, aiming to foster a more inclusive team culture by using phrases such as “team member” and “team manager” instead.

It’s a decision that came about when the firm’s co-founding partner (now team manager) Marbet Lewis realized she was only using those titles because, well, that’s what law firms always do.

“Those titles are really for the outside world. It’s not for you. If you want to act at that level and you’ve gained the experience at that level, giving you a partner title doesn’t change that,” Lewis said. “It doesn’t make you more successful, and, in some ways, it can actually be a barrier because it can be intimidating to other people.”

The 16-employee firm has also changed its compensation structure to a more commission-style model, providing attorneys with base pay while payouts are determined by productivity, performance and client generation.

The firm is also encouraging conversations about compensation, switching to peer evaluations instead of supervisor evaluations, rotating client liaisons, and offering bonuses twice a year to avoid the mystery and stress that can accompany singular, end-of-year

bonuses. Staff and attorneys will also be able to take on less work on a particular year if they choose to, as Lewis said she wants to avoid making anyone feel “stuck on a track.”

The idea, Lewis said, is to relinquish the concept of “Well, I’ve been an attorney for 20 years, so this is what I deserve.”

“I hated when I would be billing 2,500 hours a year, going above and beyond, generating work, generating clients, and I couldn’t sit at the table because I hadn’t been practicing a certain amount of years, or I couldn’t adjust my comp and didn’t have a say in my compensation because I just hadn’t reached that level in terms of years of practice,” she said. “We want to change that.”

The new titles at the firm are “team manager,” “team leader,” “team coordinator,” “team administrator,” “team assistant” and “teammate.”

“When we did it, I was a little nervous about it because I was like, ‘These guys are just going to think I’ve lost my mind. They’re just going to think she’s not going to get through this. She’s just completely lost it,’” Lewis said. “And everyone loved it. They were all like, ‘It’s silly and it’s funny, but you know what? It’s the comic relief we need right now that’s unique to our firm because of what we’ve been through.’”

No More ‘Top Instructing Downwards’

The overhaul followed about two years of operating in “survival mode,” during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of Spiritus Law’s clients

are in the retail and hospitality sectors, so pandemic shutdowns delivered a major blow to them and the firm. Profits came roaring back in 2021, but then a family tragedy struck.

Lewis' nephew suffered a brain aneurysm in December, and while he was recovering in the ICU, he contracted COVID-19 and died. It was a devastating time not only for Lewis but for the firm, which includes some family members.

In the new year, Lewis, along with her husband and co-founding partner Robert Lewis, realized many of the policies they'd fallen back on during the pandemic were reminiscent of how they used to do things in Big Law, and not all of them were helpful habits for a small firm.

“Once we had a moment to lower the temperature and sit with our team after this enormous tragedy, that was the sentiment: we want to get back to the times when we worked as a team, and when we really all had a crucial role and it wasn't just about the top instructing downwards,” Lewis said. “Rob and I aren't kings of the universe. We don't run everything and we certainly don't know everything.”

The Lewises worked at Greenspoon Marder, Akerman, GrayRobinson and Holland & Knight before starting their firm.



Marbet Lewis of Spiritus Law. Courtesy photo

Another key driver behind the title changes was that many of the firm's most key figures are nonattorney consultants, who, by law, can't be partners.

"I think Rob and I realized the importance of having a team," Lewis said. "When we were in Big Law, it was something we always wanted. We wanted a team that was open, that we could rely on, that everyone felt free to express their opinions, bring their ideas to the table, not just, 'Oh, what do the bosses think? What do the partners say? Let's just follow instruction.' We wanted collaboration and we wanted interaction."

But Lewis acknowledged that Spiritus Law's approach probably wouldn't work for large firms.

"I know we're very small, so it's easier for us to maneuver and to make changes and be innovative and try things out because it's easy for us to unwind when things don't work out," Lewis said.

One example is the four-day workweek the firm tried a few years ago, but walked back after realizing they couldn't properly function with half the staff out on Fridays and Mondays. But the point, Lewis reasons, is that it should be OK to experiment.

"I think everyone in the world's mental health is not great right now," she said. "It's just like, 'Oh my gosh, are aliens landing? What level of Jumanji are we on at this point?' So there are very minor changes that can be made that just make all the difference in the world to your team, and I think that trickles over into how you represent your clients and how your clients view you."