



CASE STUDY: Norton Rose South Africa

Client Overview

South African law firm Deneys Reitz Inc was founded in 1920. By the late 2000s it had approximately 100 partners, offices in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town and was one of the 'Big Five' in South Africa. Deneys Reitz joined the Norton Rose Group in June 2011, simultaneously rebranding as Norton Rose South Africa.

Norton Rose is a leading international law firm offering a full business law service from offices in Europe, Asia, Australia, Canada, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Central Asia. In 2013 the firm will join forces with Fulbright & Jaworski L.L.P., as Norton Rose Fulbright, which will have 3,800 lawyers and be a top 10 global legal practice.

Synopsis

Norton Rose South Africa is an international pan-African practice with one of the largest legal footprints in South Africa. In a mere two years, it transitioned from Deneys Reitz, a local law firm, to a member of one of the top ten global law firms in the world.

Key to this significant transformation was a strategy review process facilitated by strategic facilitation and implementation specialists, Customer Diagnostics. Workshops were conducted early in 2010. The resulting strategic action plan saw several new internal structures and processes successfully embedded by mid-2011, at which time Deneys Reitz also successfully concluded its merger with Norton Rose.

The Challenge

It had become clear over a period of years that Deneys Reitz needed to change the way it was managed. The firm was facing a number of external challenges, including the global financial crisis, increasing international competition, the culture of mobility and growing interest in Africa. "We realised we could no longer simply practise as lawyers," says Rob Otty, then deputy chairman of Deneys Reitz and now managing director of Norton Rose South Africa. "We had grown from 20 partners in the 1980s to approximately 100 in 2009 and needed to change from a collection of professional partners and become businessmen."

During 2009 the firm voted to modernise the management structure. A Supervisory Board was created to replace the Executive Board, placing management in the hands of a much smaller committee. Some years previously, recognising Africa as a key market, Deneys Reitz had launched Africa Legal to lead the way into Africa.

By the end of 2009, therefore, the firm had an established brand operating throughout Africa as well as a new management structure. Mike Hart, Deneys Reitz's chairman, announced that he would retire 18 months later and appointed Rob Otty as his deputy until he took over the reins on Hart's retirement.

Hart and Otty had clear ideas about where the firm needed to go and decided it was time to completely re-think its strategy.

The Solution

Deneys Reitz had employed the services of a variety of specialists to assist with strategy planning over the years, including several renowned local and overseas consultants. Deneys Reitz now approached a new strategy specialist, managing director of Customer Diagnostics, Alan Kirschner, to engage with them and guide them through strategic transition. Customer Diagnostics focuses on strategy facilitation, strategy implementation and managing strategic change.

Kirschner was invited to facilitate a strategic review process, involving a small but influential group of leaders within the firm, and develop a strategic action plan.



Strategy Facilitation

The strategic workshop, involving 20 key Deney's Reitz people, was held early in 2010. Using a combination of pre-work, workshop facilitation, break-out group discussions and follow-up days, Kirschner helped the leaders clarify where they were now – and where they wanted to be. They agreed their goals and identified key focus areas. They dealt with problems and issues, identifying the few that - if properly addressed - would enable them to achieve their new vision. They decided where to focus their resources. For each focus area a team of champions was created to define what success would look like and to itemise the actions needed to get there. Each action had an owner and a deadline, to ensure strategy delivery. Finally, Kirschner provided tools to measure and monitor the progress of the strategy implementation.

Results

The strategy review process provided a safe environment in which key Deney's Reitz partners could engage openly, comfortable that they were free to express their views frankly.

Kirschner's expert facilitation eliminated hierarchy, ensuring the group did not simply say what they felt the executive leadership wanted to hear. The firm emerged from the process with a clearly identified vision, key focus areas and concrete deliverables. It was now ready to embark on its successful strategic journey which resulted, two years later, in the merger with leading international law practice, Norton Rose. While a global merger wasn't specifically tabled during the strategic review process, the outcomes of the workshop informed Deney's Reitz's successful negotiations with the global giant.

Norton Rose South Africa is now headquartered in an iconic building in the Sandton business hub. The firm is no longer run as a partnership, but is nonetheless more inclusive than ever before and still boasts a partnership ethos. It is more competitive and attracts top talent at every level. "Alan assisted us by ensuring that our transformation was completely inclusive, with active participation by key people," says Hart, who describes the initial strategy meeting as a cathartic moment. "This is the real value that Alan brought. He ensured everyone was part of the process and the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. We left it completely to him to engineer and he wouldn't let anyone out of the room until we'd achieved what we needed to."

He says that Kirschner helped the firm achieve a brilliant transition from the old to the new. "What we achieved in two years is unbelievable and has delivered huge advantages for the partners," he says. "There is now so much energy in the broader group, which has no glass ceiling. In addition, Norton Rose South Africa has a marked sense of common purpose and collegiality, quite different to that of most other law firms.

"Alan provided focus, structure, discipline and enthusiasm – as well as a reluctance to ever give up," says Otty. "He is the only strategy consultant with whom we continue to engage on an ongoing basis. "We genuinely sense that he is totally committed to the firm – our success is meaningful to him."

Kirschner has since been engaged to measure how the firm was performing against its strategic goals – assessing what worked and what did not. He presented his findings to the Board and the partners, and the firm now has new action plans in place to address the issues uncovered.

Feedback

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