

Primus Inter Pares

Published in Managing Partner Magazine

August 2009

Observation and experience over the past 20-plus years have led me to formulate the 'First Law of Professional Firm Management'. It can be simply stated and I have found it to be true in firms of all sizes, shapes, hues and colours. It is most strikingly accurate among partners neither tasked with current management responsibilities nor with any historic experience of such roles.

The 'law' states that: When things go well, it is because partners are brilliant, but when things go badly, it is because the management team is 'rubbish' (normally expressed through a more pungent expletive not suitable for publication).

In conversation it is clear that some partners take the view that their firm's progress over the past decade is in spite of, rather than as a result of, their management team. However, the facts do not support this position, and much of the success of the modern law firm lies not in being more competent at the core technical skill of the professional, but by being immeasurably better at things like strategy, service, operational organisation and implementation.

This development of management practice over the past 20 years is the engine that has driven profit growth.

Managing partners now talk in terms of sources of competitive advantage, running their firms like the commercial enterprises they have become, rather than the cosy clubs they once were.

Inevitably, this same trend has also altered the relationship between the lineprofessional and their management team from one of condescending acquiescence to a realisation that, in many firms, the individual has become subservient to the enterprise. Unsurprisingly, the psyche of the professional, which holds the exercise of individual freedom so highly, is somewhat jarred by this redefined relationship.

The managing partner walks a precarious line here between the control necessary to deliver the requisite business performance and the rebellion that may ensue. How does one create management structures that drive improved efficiency, effectiveness and ultimately profit, while at the same time not disenfranchising the professionals who are fundamental to the success of that model?

Managing partners need to find the balance or tipping point that reconciles the tension implicit in this situation. It should be sufficient to effect change, yet not so much as to constrain professionals from exercising judgment and acting on their own initiative to secure opportunities.

This is a fluid and dynamic state of affairs in which the mechanistic management models developed to suit a command-and-control environment will be found lacking. In many cases, this is where firms fall short. For what is required here is not management, but rather its fusion with leadership.

But what is the difference between leadership and management? While management is about dealing with complexity, leadership is concerned with change. Management may be viewed as the process by which a complex situation is analysed, a way forward is devised, a system structured, implementation achieved and progress mapped. To an extent it can be learned.

Great leadership is something far more difficult to bottle. It's the ability to envision a compelling future, to drive the process of change and to take a firm on a journey through the commitment of partners and staff. It requires deep cultural understanding, high levels of emotional intelligence, tenacity and determination to succeed.

In order to be effective leaders, moreover, it is crucial that managing partners not only command respect for their management skills, but also that they are respected professionals in their own right.

While *primus inter pares* may seem an antiquated way to describe the leader of the modern firm, it has much resonance.

The managing partner must understand the context of their firm. They must know what it means 'at the sharp end' to be a professional practicing in the 21st century.

They must have vision and empathy in equal measure. Moreover, they must demonstrate the tenacity and will to win that they once displayed for their clients in their approach to the success of their business.

As firms create a level playing field in terms of management capabilities, future sources of competitive advantage will come from those able to develop a strong cohort of leaders. How can recruitment and talent-management programmes act as catalysts in this quest?

For those firms in which people rise to this challenge, the future is bright. The jury is still out when it comes to identifying how many firms will fall into this category and how many will fall by the wayside.

