

Gunfight at the OK Corral

When complacency about real issues provides a false sense of security.

By Sean Larkan

When approached for advice by firms who are clearly in trouble, it is surprising how often partners in those firms are oblivious to or complacent about the situation.

It seems you can throw a GFC (Global Financial Crisis) at a firm, have their competitors stealing staff and clients, debtor and work in progress levels skyrocketing and profits plateaued, and yet still be faced with partners not wishing to rock the boat or confront issues. When you talk to partners in such firms it is not uncommon to hear things like, *“At least our profit levels are okay,”* or *“We have an okay bunch of lawyers and staff turnover is not too bad.”*

While this situation is all too common, the root causes can be quite complex and difficult to tackle. While complacency is often blamed this can be a cover for things like avoidance behaviour or even fear. Or partners simply feel they can't be bothered, as without added discomfort they are still able to make a 'good' profit. In other words, *“It ain't broke so don't fix it,”* or in Australian terms, *“She'll be right, mate.”*

Unfortunately, all these explanations avoid the real issues. Complacency in whatever form it presents itself must be addressed — not necessarily with a belt of ammo and six-guns, but confront it you must. Try some or all of the following, depending on what your instincts tell you:

- ask partners what they think — face to face is best if you can do it. The issues are bound to surface;
- study industry benchmark surveys and highlight obvious issues;
- review top 25 client lists and fees generated per client over recent years and note trends;

- analyze staff engagement and client reviews for issues. Do the same with staff exit interviews;
- plot where each practice group and industry sector group lies on the “life-cycle curve” — if they fall into the “mature” or “decline” phase, it can prompt action;
- have all partners rate (say out of 10) the strategic importance and separately, the strength of each practice group and industry sector group in the firm and plot this on a matrix. This will quickly highlight areas of potential as well as areas for attention;
- get an external objective review undertaken; and
- arm yourself with examples from the business world of organizations (ideally clients of the firm) renewing and transforming themselves so they can adapt to competitive forces or trends.

Armed with these inputs you will be in a much stronger position to highlight the real issues, address your concerns, engender some passion and energy amongst partners to address them and at the same time engage partners in the process, all without a shoot-out.

You might even manage to persuade partners to change their ways in future by taking a tip from violinist Nigel Kennedy: *“I hate complacency. I play every gig as if it could be my last; then I enjoy it more than ever.”*

[Contact the author, Sean Larkan.](#)