

Handling Partners With Strong Views

QUESTION:

Since recently becoming our firm's managing director, I've been engaging a number of my colleagues in discussions on how we should be concerned with delivering more value to our clients. I think this is an important issue for us going forward and find that most of my partners are on-board conceptually and willing to explore the issue. However, there are a few who have responded uncompromisingly, with rather curt, dismissive statements whenever the topic comes up. Any tips for me on how you might handle the partner who holds strong beliefs on high-stake topics and demonstrates little willingness to either listen or consider alternative views?

RESPONSE:

Members of our LAB confided that during their respective tenures there were always a small handful of folks who resisted *everything* that seemed new or progressive . . . the Fortune list of Best Places to Work was for sissies; having offices outside of your core market was silly when your core market was such a strong market; a proposed firm childcare facility was inconsistent with the workplace as they envisioned it; 360 degree reviews let the inmates take control of the asylum; and finally, new technology was a waste of money and a drain on partner profits.

The LAB has some advice, both general and related to the 'value' issue you raised. First, keep in mind that an idea isn't 'new' just because you happen to think of it. That means that some of your partners will feel they know about the idea, have thought it through and have either accepted or rejected it in their practice. "Enhanced client value" may be one of these. It is quite a popular (and fashionable) discussion topic these days and while some partners do react to it by resisting change, some others - - some rightly - - may feel that they have been delivering value quite effectively for a long time.

That said, dealing with dismissive and resistant people can be extremely frustrating. Trying to change them can be even worse. Understanding why one of your partners finds it so difficult to change can provide some insight and relief. Although changing another person is out of your control, there are some things you can do that can help. Here are a few suggestions based on our collective experience:

- 1. You might want to explore getting the message to come through directly from your clients or competitors.**

In the case of value, it should be easy to find support for your views on both of these fronts. After all, it's one thing for the leader to say, "my beloved partners, I think we should begin to explore this particular initiative in order to better serve our clients." But have you ever noticed how some message is taken far more seriously and gains far more traction when it comes from the mouth of one of your important signature clients?

Some managing partners have done an admirable job of simply bringing clients to the table on a regular basis to talk to their partners about what's going on in their industry, what new issues are emerging and what they think outside law firms should be doing to partner with them. Those same managing partners can then be found roaming the halls over the next following days, talking to each partner about what he or she thinks about what they heard that particular GC say.

The same can be said with respect to how many partners react when they read about something one of their competitors (whom they have some respect for) is doing. Find a way to casually distribute to your partners, news and rumors about what you find competitors taking action on. Done well, you will soon have a line at your door of partners wanting you to take some kind of action on the very same issue.

2. Let your difficult partner be heard - but in more depth than quips - so you and the other partners can assess the merits of his or her views.

People usually have a reason – be it rational or emotional (likely a combination of the two) for why they don't want to support a particular issue. A mistake you can make as a leader is to assume you know why. Even if some obstinate partner has shared his or her reasons in the past, it is important to ask them about their concerns and reservations this time. Do this in as authentic and non-threatening way as you can. Your goal is to truly understand what they are thinking and feeling about the particular subject. Recognize that you're dealing with the psychological complexities of a person here, not just a "rational, logical" situation.

Be sure your interest is sincere. If you just want a chance to demonstrate the perfection of your own opinions, you may be assured that you will elicit the same from your partner. But if you want dialogue, be sure you are open to new information and perspectives. Your goal should not be to convince them or influence them at this point. Your goal is only to listen. Recognize that doing this may, in itself, be tremendously valuable. The chance to describe thoughts and feelings often helps the resisters understand their feelings better themselves. Be willing to ask exactly how big of a deal this issue, and their resistance to it, is. Assuming you are familiar with 'active listening' techniques this is a good time to use them.

3. Acknowledge that you heard your partner and understand his or her views - you can then respectfully agree, disagree or just move ahead without them.

Everyone appreciates being heard in a nonjudgmental way and your partners need to be acknowledged for their opinions. Depending on the issue and your partner's particular response you have a number of alternative courses of action:

- You can encourage disagreement. A startling truth about dialogue is that people are okay with you expressing even very strongly held views so long as you are equally genuine in your invitation of their disagreement. Before sharing your opinions with your partner, make a statement like, *"You know, I've got a really strong opinion on this. I've thought a great deal about it and read pretty widely, and I'd like to tell you my view. But at the end, if you see holes in it, or if you have new information I don't have, I desperately hope you'll challenge me with it. I really want to learn from your view in any way I can."* This sincere invitation takes the fighting wind out of most obstinate partners' sails. They realize they don't have to beat you over the head with their opinions because you're *asking* for them!

- What can happen is that when you offer a suggestion and your partner opposes it, you feel compelled to dig in and rationalize why your suggestion was the right course of action. It can be more productive to steer any debate in a productive direction in an effort to find common ground. In those cases the more effective move may be to simply acknowledge the partner's point of view. When you do this, your partner's opposition has nowhere to go. Without losing any important ground you can simply say, "*I see your point,*" and leave it at that. You can then come back later and approach the topic from a different angle.

- Never miss a chance to agree. When we agree on 50 percent of a topic and disagree on 50 percent we tend to move quickly to the disagreements because those are what interest us the most. However, if you want worthwhile dialogue with your partner, take the time to listen for points on which you agree. Point them out. Confirm them. Then—and only then—move to the areas of disagreement. When you do this you reaffirm that your goal is not to win, it's to learn.

- Sometimes you can move past their concerns by "agreeing to disagree." And sometimes, once they have been heard, they are ready to move on with the change, even if it isn't what they would have done had they had the choice.

4. After your partner has been heard, do not let that individual be disruptive in meetings - if he is, stop him politely and stop the disruptive behavior.

Perhaps your partner's reluctance isn't a show-stopper. Perhaps this individual enjoys whining about the change but is actually prepared to move forward with implementing the new procedure. Or perhaps they are a major road-block. Whatever the situation, recognize that while we need to be patient with people (not everyone will come on board with any change at the same time); at some point their resistance or reluctance may become a performance issue. When the situation is a performance issue, you need to call upon your one-on-one coaching skills as appropriate and necessary.

5. Trying to turn a person like this around up front may be counter productive - some relish the maverick role and use it to get attention and so will persist. Do not give them public attention.

An obstinate partner constitutes an important challenge. Dig deep into your determination and rally your positive thoughts. Don't let this individual bring your spirit down, which is most certainly what they are trying to do. It's a resistance tactic, so don't give them such an easy victory. Look for ways to quarantine them to avoid collateral damage. Furthermore, your other partners are watching closely for your reaction. Lead with courage, conviction and stamina.

6. Surround the individual - that is work with those who support the issue and see if he or she falls into line.

People do things to benefit themselves, not to benefit you. Why is it in his or her interest to embrace any specific issue? Sometimes the answer lies simply in them seeing that other of their colleagues and people whom they admire are signing on to support the issue.

Also consider involving some of the naysayers, in some way, in your change leadership efforts. Turning an influential cynic into an advocate represents a great coup for any change effort. When people see it happening, their own doubts about the particular project quickly

evaporate.

7. Use an influencer - someone he or she respects - done in private.

If the resister still needs help being influenced to change, you may not be the right or best person. Maybe you don't have the right communications style. Maybe they don't want to hear from anyone in the firm's leadership ranks. Maybe the stars are out of alignment. Whatever the reason, encourage them to talk to their peers or others who are on board who might be able to relate the benefits of the initiative more successfully than you.

8. Give him or her "private" space to change their mind and their behavior.

New situations and places can be scary, and rather than admit their fear, people will often appear to be stubborn. Plus, we're comfortable with what's familiar to us. So it's easier to resist something that's new and unfamiliar. If your initiative can be broken down into bite size chunks, that feel doable and relatively easy, there is a greater likelihood that you'll get a degree of co-operation.

Alternatively, if the primary issue is a lack of confidence in the probability of success, talk won't change their attitude. Actions and results will. If you can quickly deliver some short-term successes as proof of the validity of your concept and as evidence of your determination, you may quietly convert those who were initially resistant to your efforts.

9. Based on your example, where you have many of the partners with you, take a deep breath and move ahead.

The reality in many situations is that not everyone will like or want to work under the changed scenario. You will gradually recognize that some of your partners will never be won over. If you have a large enough group, there will always be someone whose mind won't change. Trying to convince every single one of them would sap your energy from other issues that were more important. So when you feel you have built a reasonable consensus around an issue, move on to the next issue.

We hope these modest ideas are useful to you as you engage with others. We truly believe the future lies in our capacity to develop a common purpose and mutual respect.

© 2010 **Managing Partner Leadership Advisory Board (The LAB)**

The LAB was formed as a resource to provide pragmatic advice to assist new managing partners with their critical burning issues and help them succeed. **The LAB** is comprised of the following distinguished current and former law firm leaders: Angelo Arcadipane (Dickstein Shapiro LLP); John Bouma (Snell & Wilmer LLP); Brian K. Burke (Baker & Daniels LLP); Ben F. Johnson, III (Alston & Bird LLP); Keith B. Simmons (Bass Berry & Sims PLC); William J. Strickland (McGuire Woods LLP); Harry P. Trueheart, III (Nixon Peabody LLP); R. Thomas Stanton (Squire Sanders); Robert M. Granatstein (Blake Cassels and Graydon) together with Patrick J. McKenna