

Continuing to Solve the Great “Teamwork Puzzle” v2

By [Michael D. Short](#) on June 17, 2015

Last month, I revisited an earlier series of blogs on the elusive goal of “teamwork” with a focus on why so many firms have not achieved significant strides toward creating an institutional culture of teamwork.

The earlier writings linked to compensation systems. In these addenda I am focusing on select internal challenges that hinder progress toward a firmwide state of cooperation and seamless sharing that most firms want but very few have.

[Last month](#), I offered two observations that act as hindrances –

1. The structure of the Managing Partner’s job in many firms is not conducive to doing everything that is needed to achieve teamwork.
2. The ability to implement teamwork will steadily increase over time (as different generations join the law firm work force).

This month I offer the following additional and inter-related observations to my list of reasons why teamwork often falls short in law firms:

Observation #3 – *Any effective team needs the best available leader, but in law firms these are often political appointments.*

A great leader is not always defined by a large book of business, a headful of gray hair, or the ability to whine and cajole effectively. Great leaders are sometimes young, quiet, and unassuming. However, within the world of partnership politics and power, these people tend to be overlooked because – for the law firm leader making appointments – putting the big books, the seniors, or the squeaky wheels in place is the easier, expected, and safe move. Putting others in place requires dealing with the whiners and devoting much time and internal “capital” toward placating those who feel they should have been appointed.

Observation #4 – *Democracy – a valued characteristic in many law firm “cultures” – can hinder a team’s ability to collaborate in an effective and efficient manner.* An effective team is decisive, confident, and willing to take some risks. These characteristics usually flow from having the right leader in place (see Observation #3). Without this strong leader, most teams within a typical law firm make decisions based on consensus, which requires myriad meetings and negotiations. Most decisions that are the product of internal negotiations are safe, general in nature, and devoid of personal responsibility or accountability. This is NOT to say that a strong leader is a dictator who should decree the direction of the team from on high. Rather, a strong leader will usually collect the input and thoughts from each team member, synthesize this information into the best starting-point proposal, and quickly “work” this proposal with the key stakeholders – both within and outside the group – and then involve the team and the rest of the firm. This is a quicker process that is still inclusive and results in a stronger product.

Observation #5 – *Unequal commitment levels will undo any team.* As soon as some team members “check-out” or feel that their investment time is better spent elsewhere than other members of the team grow resentful and/or frustrated with the additional responsibilities that they must assume and the slowed progress. The entire effort often grinds to a painful halt soon thereafter. An oft-heard (by us) source of frustration is the slow, democracy-related pace referenced in observation #4, above. As soon as those with high hopes and elevated expectations see that the process will be

protracted and the results will be predictably safe, they will become frustrated and easily distracted. Of course, there are other reasons why certain team members lose interest. If the reasons are personal then this person should not have been placed on the team in the first place. If the reasons are team-related, they are usually related to the team leader's style, pace, or process.

In the sports world – which is the easiest point of reference for studies of effective teams – the winners aren't democratic groups that vote on every play or game strategy because their leaders don't want to be disliked or second-guessed. To the contrary, there is an understood structure, decisiveness, and some risk-taking. To be fair, there is also a level of accountability around the leaders who are not producing results as well, which also links back to Observation #3, above.

Many shortcomings with respect to teams and teamwork eventually lead back to getting the right leaders in place. While this sounds easy enough, I have yet to meet a law firm leader who claims to have an abundance of high-quality, natural leaders who are trained in the position and understand law firm group dynamics well enough to succeed.

I'll speak to this point next month.