

It's my ball and you can't play with it!

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"It's my ball and you can't play with it!" is both the mantra of the incorrigible infant and the modus operandi of the petulant professional. Behind the phrase lies an implicit understanding, "we can play together, perhaps even playing the game that you want to play, but only if ultimately I'm in control. Take away my control and I'll take away my ball!"

So it is with the pervasive culture in many firms when the delicate issue of knowledge sharing is mooted. Intellectually all will see the good sense and compelling business argument for leveraging the firm's knowledge assets – ranging from increased internal efficiency, through improved risk management, onto maximising client opportunities.

However, many will resist the emotional implications of giving up some of their tacit expertise or knowledge.

Whilst many firms will search for cheque book answers, investing in IT solutions and armies of technology consultants, the real challenge of behavioural change will remain unaddressed. Until this is confronted and overcome, the true potential of a firm's knowledge assets will never be realised.

"Trust me, I'm a lawyer!" has not been the experience of many who have worked within law firms. Indeed the issue of trust lies at the centre of this intellectual acceptance yet emotional denial conundrum.

The key factor that must to be addressed in leveraging business development knowledge is the emotional contract that exists between those that have the knowledge and those that want it. This is fundamentally a question of trust in several dimensions - trust that the knowledge will not be misused, trust that the organisation will not subsequently ostracise those who have potentially weakened their position by sharing, trust that client relationships that have been developed over years will not be damaged by inappropriate actions.

In many cases the management team and partners in search of knowledge will bemoan those who will not share. The point is often missed that it is incumbent on those who wish to acquire the knowledge to earn this trust. Why should partners share knowledge with a management team that, in the past, has not recognised and rewarded sharing? Why should someone share client information with the firm's "bull in the china shop" partner who has a reputation of wrecking

relationships through ill-considered actions? Of course, in these circumstances knowledge will not be shared and this is entirely understandable. Trust needs to be earned in both directions.

At an organisational level, firms need to build systems to reward and recognise the behaviours that it wishes to encourage; vilifying those that are to be diminished. How many firms have an explicit way of making the active sharing of information a source of power, recognition and reward? Indeed, the implicit situation for many firms is that the act of not sharing is the best source of power, career development and mobility. Perhaps an equally relevant question therefore is how many firms will actively manage-out those who will not play the team-game?

Does this mean that there is no longer a role for the free-thinking, independent minded, mobile professional in the emerging world of the “law firm as a corporate organisation”? Given how deep this vein of culture runs within the profession, there has to be. To ban this personality trait would also remove from firms some of the most effective professionals in their midst. But there also has to be an explicit understanding to clarify the relationship between individual freedom and business direction. It’s what I call tight framework – loose fit.

In this model, the tight framework is defined in terms of minimum standards (of performance and behaviour), articulated in the firm’s values and demonstrated by a common sense of purpose and direction. It is the framework outside which members of the firm do not deviate. It is a tight framework.

But the model I am describing has a loose fit. It does not prescribe behaviour to a level of detail that hinders and hampers professionals. It is not founded in bureaucracy but in providing an environment in which professionals can prosper whilst at the same time the firm within which they work creates a sustainable and profitable brand.

Tight framework - loose fit is an approach to management based on the principle of as much as necessary, as little as possible.

Applying this principle to the area of knowledge sharing poses an interesting question; just how much is necessary? Many firms will over-engineer initiatives to the level that are almost certain to fail. This is where judgement and skill is needed if firms are to get their lawyers to play ball rather than take their ball away!

