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# Consensus is Not a Synonym for Unanimity

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There is much talk about the importance of achieving partner consensus on the big decisions which will define a firm's future direction. Consensus is a worthy objective and one which, as research shows unequivocally, is likely to lead to a more cohesive firm. There is less clarity, however, over what consensus means in practice and how it should be reached.

What is clear is that consensus should not be a synonym for unanimity - firms have, for too long, been forced to the point of making the "decision of least offence" or the taking the lowest common denominator option by this misconception. Consensus is perhaps best viewed as reaching a state of acceptance that a particular decision represents the best option for the business, albeit it may have negative implications for some including, perhaps, oneself.

What consensus means in practice differs according to the nature of the firm, but what is clear is that endorsement by the key stakeholders is essential for any strategy to have a fighting chance of success. In a ten partner firm this may mean that consensus requires all to be comfortable with the direction that the firm is taking; even if the result is a dilution of its efficacy. In a 300 partner firm, the dynamic is quite different. Most partners in large firms are operating in something much closer to an employee-shareholder relationship that an owner-manager one. Consensus in this context is a more political construct – securing the majority needed to carry sway and ensuring that the key power-brokers are engaged and committed.

However, the traits underpinning a consensus-driven approach are the same in all firms. They include clear communication, a sense of engagement and a feeling that one's voice can be heard (even if ultimately the direction taken by their firm is not that which has been personally voiced). It is about respect and giving partners an opportunity to interact with the senior management team and inform its thinking.

Both academic research and the anecdotal evidence that we see around us suggests that the firms which adopt a consensual approach to decision making tend to perform better in the longer term. That is not to say that, on occasion, the leadership team cannot act unilaterally on "big agenda items", in order to avert a crisis or capitalise on a time-sensitive opportunity, but rather that the overriding philosophy of the firm is centred on building a common sense of purpose and direction.

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Contrast this with a management style which is dictatorial, where partners are informed after the event and where important developments are relayed by the media. Stated in these terms, it is clear which approach will deliver the longer term benefits, shared vision and unified partner group which is so important to the development of a successful twenty first century firm.

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