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Leading a shared vision for a law firm merger

In a strategy which is merger based, it is important that there is a clear vision of the future, which is easily understandable and provides a strong rationale as to why merger is the best option – illustrating both the opportunities that will be created as well as the threats and risks which will be reduced or eliminated. The development of this vision is at the core of the leader's role, but research shows that it is the process by which the vision is created and agreed that is likely to be fundamental to its successful realisation.¹

Since merger will be regarded by many within the firm as a high-risk approach (especially if the firm is prepared to be the junior party in any transaction), it is vital that any vision for a merged business has high levels of buy-in to avoid disaffection and possible desertion of important personnel. It is through the creation of a powerful shared vision that people within the business are given a better understanding of how a proposal for merger sits – both within the wider context of what the firm is trying to achieve in the longer term and why this is the best option available.

Leadership, vision and change are inextricably intertwined. Many would argue that the role of the leader is to come up with a vision for the firm and then be in the vanguard of the change process required to deliver it. But is it that straightforward? To what extent should a leader's vision for the future be his own and how much should it reflect the view of the people he leads?

Shared vision

Research by Kouzes and Posner indicates that organisational visions that gain the most traction are those which are shared. In many respects this is commonsensical: how can one expect to gain full commitment to a vision for the future unless that vision has been built up

from a common base of understanding and reflects the aspirations of the wider firm? Emotional intelligence should be at the fore in building this strong consensus, which is also at the core of change-management best practice.

That is not to say that a leader should not have ambition, or simply be a passive reflection of the current status quo. Indeed, Kouzes and Posner's research shows that the attribute most desired by team members of their leaders (after honesty) is that they be forward looking. The desire and expectation is that their leaders will look to the future in ways that others cannot, but the crucial nuance lies in the way in which those leaders go about developing forward-looking capabilities.

“Leadership, vision and change are inextricably intertwined”

What is clear is that the best way to develop this competency to understand the future, and so have a clear picture of the best options open to the firm, is not to rely on one's own soothsaying capabilities and personal prescience. The most effective leaders undertake deep and ongoing analyses of the market to better understand both the current and future conditions that their firms will face. They also participate on an ongoing basis in considered discussion, both within and outside the business, to test what they have learned and to hear alternative views.

Very importantly, the most effective leaders consult widely across their firm in order to get a good grasp of the views and opinions of others, seeking to explore concerns and consider alternative options

and scenarios. Whilst they have a broad vision, they are also open to input and to minor modification or more fundamental change if this is in the best longer-term interests of the business. They understand that, in a law firm culture, the building of strong consensus is key to success.

Such dialogue will usually begin within the leadership team. Depending on the size of the firm, this group will vary from all of the partners (in a smaller entity) to a management or strategy board (in a larger organisation). By outlining and developing a vision with these stakeholders, the seed is planted. It can then be developed and tested, amended and refined until it is something which is sufficiently shaped to be suitable for sharing more widely.

It is then possible for this group to begin the process of comprehensive consultation. Consensus building, rather like the layers of an onion, can be developed incrementally, accepting that valid inputs may be received, which feed into the creation of a more granular vision and strategy to achieve it.

Building commitment

Any vision must resonate with its constituency if it is to gain commitment. Particularly in a law firm, without high levels of commitment, no vision, no matter how articulately expressed, can be realised in practice. It is incumbent on the leader to build this commitment if a merger process is to have the best potential of a successful outcome. ¶¶

Andrew Hedley has been advising law firm leaders on strategy and change management for more than 15 years (www.hedleyconsulting.com)

Endnote

1. See 'To Lead, Create a Shared Vision', James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Harvard Business Review*, March 2008