



Cultivating Loyalty

The London Times recently wrote about John Burns, a 93 year old employee who has clocked up almost 80 years employment at the same Scottish law firm. He claims that he wants to continue to at least 100 and while he now works only 4 days a week, this is not apparently at his choice but to reduce the amount of unused holiday time he has accrued!

Some 30 years before John Burns started working, a Harvard philosopher, Josiah Royce, wrote a book entitled 'The Philosophy of Loyalty'. In this book Royce argues that life is empty and meaningless if it is essentially self-centered and that a fulfilling, meaningful life requires a cause or causes beyond self-interest.

Such causes can be varied – country, religion, family, a deeply held principle or belief, or a common work endeavor.

Royce argues that where there is a 'community' jointly pursuing a cause, greater meaning and purpose result. And Royce places particularly high emphasis on the phenomenon of loyalty to a 'lost cause' which he defines as not a hopeless cause, but rather one that cannot be fulfilled within the lifetime of the community or any of its members. Such causes he argues are capable of evoking an individual's highest hopes and commitment.

Royce died shortly after writing his philosophy but the value of his central themes were recognized and developed by others including many of the most influential management writers of the past century - probably most notably in theories of motivation and the importance of organizations having a shared purpose.

And in 2010, almost exactly 100 years after Royce's book was first published, Daniel Pink produced his highly acclaimed and influential, best-selling book 'Drive' which focuses on the nature of motivation and whose origins can be traced directly back to Royce. Pink's conclusions identify three key aspects of motivation: autonomy, mastery and purpose - with purpose defined in terms of doing something bigger than ourselves.

Certainly over recent years there has been a strong focus in all types of organizations, law firms included, in developing and then harnessing the power of a shared purpose. This is epitomized in the vision and mission statements – many hugely irritating - that adorn websites, advertising, marketing materials, reception areas and even entire corporate buildings.

In any number of law firms such statements have been launched with considerable expectation and enthusiasm. Unfortunately the great majority have proved to have a short lifetime, deliver little if any lasting value and are superficial at best. While many demonstrate skillful wordsmithing they do not represent an inherently shared purpose of partners; if anything they are more likely to state what they think people want to hear. Hardly surprisingly then that attempts to superimpose them on partnerships are, rarely if ever successful. Clearly this is not the route to creating a 'community of cause'.

Recent discussions we have had with law firm leaders indicate that there is growing concern that the 'community of cause' in their firm is no longer as strong as in the past and is not inspiring to partners and others in the firm.

So if the 'community of cause' is weakening, is it not worth asking why this is the case? Is it a reflection of broader social trends where it is becoming less usual for anyone to commit themselves to one organization? Is it because there is growing anxiety following recent high profile law firm failures over recent years and individuals are concerned about being left on a foundering ship? Is it greed? Or is it something else?

We are currently undertaking research to answer these questions. Our preliminary work has already reached some initial

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observations:

- There are firms where the unwanted departure of partners to other firms is extremely rare. While some of these firms enjoy the inherent advantages of being among the elite (either at a national level or within a particular niche or local market) others do not. Strikingly among such firms their community of cause – the powerful, shared common purpose that invisibly but powerfully binds the partnership together – is often sufficiently strong and overt that it can be observed and ‘felt’ by outsiders.
- Second, effective leadership is absolutely essential to realize a shared purpose; leaders of firms with a strong ‘community of cause’ articulate an inspired purpose and then relentlessly communicate it with words and, even more importantly demonstrate it in action all the time.
- Third, firms with a strong ‘community of cause’ tend to be much more deliberate in terms of recruitment, ensuring that those recruited share the same values as others in the firm. Notably at the lateral partner level they are particularly adept at attracting partners who perform at far higher levels than in their previous firm – moving to a firm where they feel true purpose seems to release unrealized potential.
- Fourth, they recognize that shared purpose is extremely hard to maintain alongside rapid growth - and this is even more the case if the growth is opportunistic. They recognize the enormous importance of effective integration and invest in this heavily when undertaking mergers and significant lateral additions.
- Lastly, there is a deeply held belief among partners of being ‘guardians’ – with a strong drive to leave the partnership in better shape than when they joined it. Partners, and senior partners in particular, are willing to leave money on the table and signal their willingness to invest in the firm, and recognize that their predecessors did the same. This sends a strong message throughout the firm.

We believe that a strong ‘community of cause’ across a partnership will always pay great dividends. It is not as strong as it might be in many firms today, with its absence representing a competitive weakness.

It is of course no easy task to build and maintain a ‘community of cause’. For it to be effective it must truly represent a shared purpose, it will take time to develop and its potential realized. It will almost inevitably have strong links with a strategy that builds on the firm’s distinctive strengths, is felt to be worthwhile, is genuine, and is something the partners and others strongly feel that they want a role in achieving – or, returning to Royce, at least striving to achieve.

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