



## Playing to Strengths

In the majority of sports teams there are players with very differing skills and characteristics: the quarterback and wide receiver in American and Canadian football; the striker and goal-keeper in soccer; the prop and fly-half in rugby.

The differing skills and characteristics required to succeed in particular positions are obvious. And individual players focus on honing the skills that will enable them to excel in the role they fulfil. For most this involves dedicated training, building on the inherent talent they have. And while all players will be expected to meet certain common levels of performance, related for example to underlying fitness, beyond this they will focus strongly on perfecting the skills that are core to the role they are expected to fulfil rather than other capabilities.

A team comprising only star players is not however sufficient to ensure success – the strengths and skills of the individuals need to be channeled and harnessed. The individual players have to work together effectively, have trust and confidence in each other, have a collective drive to succeed as a team, and have a culture and set of values that bind them together. The culture and values will vary from team to team but invariably at the core is a belief that success is a result of team as opposed to individual player performance (and this is also what carries them through periods of adversity.)

In many of the most successful partnerships this same phenomenon is recognized. Partners share core values and work very effectively together and as part of this do play to their strengths: some will focus primarily on winning new clients if that is where their strongest skills lie, while others, based on their individual strengths, will concentrate on nurturing and developing existing clients or on managing the delivery of the highest quality advice and services, or perhaps fulfilling leadership and management roles.

While firms often recognize the value of different partner roles, many have found it difficult to achieve the right balance. There are two main reasons for this: either their culture, and compensation system, remain anchored in individualism or alternatively despite aspiring to move to a more team based style of working there remains an underlying pull towards partner self-sufficiency.

In the first set of circumstances there may well be a shared vision and strategy. There is consistency and convergence in what all or a vast majority of partners are seeking to achieve. But there is an ingrained although not necessarily articulated belief that the way of achieving this is based on partners working primarily individually - winning work in the marketplace that they themselves (perhaps assisted by their immediate associates) largely undertake. There can be a strong sense of underlying collegiality but partners work relatively independently both in attracting work and delivering legal advice. The partnership is based on a culture that regards success as being fundamentally dependent on the efforts, resourcefulness, entrepreneurialism and legal skills of each individual, essentially working discretely.

The second group of firms do have a strong desire to work in a more team-oriented way, recognizing the benefits from such an approach. (In fact research shows that matters that involved multiple practice areas tend to be more profitable than those within a single area.) The hurdle such firms face is encouraging a sufficient number of partners to move to a position where their practices are not independent and self-sufficient to one where partners are comfortable being mutually-dependent on others - for the partners with strong business development skills a dependency on others to undertake the work; for those with particularly strong technical skills a dependency on others to manage and develop the client relationships.

Such inter-dependency can open up great opportunities. Building a firm with a balance of the required skills but with each partner focusing most on what they are best at accomplishing has the potential to far out-perform a firm where individual partners operate more independently of one another and inevitably undertake tasks for which they have lesser aptitude.

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Of course it is hard to move away from the concept of 'stars'. As in sports, certain roles are higher profile, attract more kudos and are more highly valued. There is little escaping this although a thoughtful approach to the performance metrics used and circulated can help. Assessing a sportsman whose role is largely defensive on the number of goals, touchdowns, or carries they achieve is clearly inappropriate as a measure of that player's capabilities and would be uniformly recognized as such. Performance metrics need to reflect the responsibilities and expectations of the role. And the same is true in law firms. For example, assessing a partner on the basis of originations is similarly unhelpful if that partner's greatest strengths and contribution lie in managing highly complex transactions or providing specialist, technical expertise.

However, it is also important that the concept of playing to strengths not be used as an excuse. Lawyers still need to be versatile and generally have well developed skills in every facet of the role, albeit exceling in one or two. The soccer defender will occasionally be in a scoring position and will need to have the skills to make the shot. The star business developer needs to be able to deliver excellent legal services and, even if the approach taken might be somewhat different from his partner's, the legal technician needs to be able to take advantage of relationship building opportunities.

There are two challenges in getting this right. The first of course is how to fairly recognize and reward partners for their specialized roles. Business development success is most often the key differentiator in compensation of partners. To encourage partners to play to their strengths a more sophisticated approach to assessing performance and contribution is required. The second is getting the right balance of skills. A firm with an overabundance of excellent technicians is unlikely to succeed. The team needs to be shaped to serve the needs of the firm's client base, strategy, practice and market position.

Of course a more team oriented approach is not suitable for all partners or all firms. Many lawyers prefer to work relatively independently – largely self-sufficient and autonomous in their work. Their firms are, however, likely to be little more than the sum of the individual practices, largely focused on more routine, less specialist work. For those wishing to win a greater proportion of higher value, more complex work and compete at a higher level in the market a team based approach is critical. Within such an approach there will likely be a set of core expectations incumbent on all partners: placing the firm's interests above their own; providing excellent service to clients; delivering the best of the firm to the client; actively contributing to business development initiatives; and so on. But beyond this each partner contributes most and adds to the overall well-being of the firm to the fullest by playing to their strengths.

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