

## **DON'T MANAGE YOUR LAW FIRM BY COMMITTEE!**

Let's be honest – most lawyers are not good managers. And frankly most don't want to manage. So why involve them in the running of the firm?

We hear of firms moving away from partnership structures to other business models but it takes more to change the culture and behaviour of a traditional partnership.

'The committee' I refer to in the title are the meetings of partners (fixed or equity) or Directors where the firm has incorporated (in name if not culture). We will refer to them as partners here for ease.

So this is what happens:

The Managing Partner will probably feel obliged to hold regular partner meetings to update and make decisions. The updating bit is the simpler element though with this comes the risk of providing too much information via 'management reports', too many mundane and unnecessary questions from attendees, and a tendency for partners only to look at their own team's performance (and compare to others).

Added to this will be Partners who talk too much through a need to be noticed and those who say nothing. So the meeting starts to get dominated by those who are probably deemed over-bearing. And on top of this many partners just want to get away from the meeting and back to fee-earning.

When decisions need to be made there might not even be any to make in the first place. Suggestions have to be brought to the table that have been considered by the Managing Partner initially.

Without something to achieve the partners meeting will descend into a talking shop.

Getting decision and plans finalised at a Partners meeting needs a skilled leader. There will be examples of self-interest, lack of understanding, points raised on minutiae, and personal vendettas rest assured. Lots of challenges! Most readers will recognise what are known as 'Stoppers' whose sentences often start 'we can't do that because....'. Stoppers can be pompous, self-interested, cautious, static, and difficult.

With all these potential issues it is no surprise that many partners meetings don't achieve much and the firm suffers accordingly. A law firm can't be managed by committee. A strong leader needs to gain trust and make decisions that are rubber stamped at meetings rather than dissected. This pushes things through and keeps momentum in the business. A ruthlessly chaired partners meeting will also help as issues that are not relevant can be quashed.

### CASE STUDY – Avoiding management by committee

A managing partner I know of avoids the toxic results of inadvertently managing by committee. He told me about it:

'If you want the business to get better and succeed it's imperative to avoid managing by committee. I select 2 or 3 people in the firm who I trust and can bounce ideas off (and get their ideas too of course). It an unofficial management team really. And we run the business. As managing partner you need all the partners to trust you and developing relationships accordingly will make life easier and the firm rosier. In my experience most partners don't want to bother with partners meetings – they just want to get on being lawyers and leave the business stuff to someone else. So don't go overboard with partners meetings. You might be able to get away with one every three months – just keep people updated by email summaries.

When you do hold partners meetings make the agenda and timescale clear and ruthlessly chair proceedings. Ensure you have made already decisions with your inner team on business matters that will be raised and email an overview of these matters in advance of the meeting. Be prepared for arguments to be voiced and be ready with answers. And remind people that the final decision is yours and yours alone and you will inform people of the outcome having heard all views.

Some partners see meetings as an opportunity to promote themselves in front of peers. Test these people – after all you want future leaders and their mettle or otherwise can be tested in such environments. And don't let heckling or domineering personalities take over– lawyers can be horrendously pompous! Have a few lines on hand to use as put downs – harsh but necessary!

Update partners by email on final decisions made and resulting progress. You will find that if you gain their respect they will let you run the business without interruption. 90% of all partners would hate your role and so won't step out of line and will let you manage if they trust you.'