

Follow the leader is no game in management

An authoritarian style can be as dangerous as a consensual manner, but the hallmark of a truly great leader is trust, says **John Gould**

A 'great' leader of a firm must be a good thing. Surely. A leader with vision, energy and resolve in abundance, leading enthusiastic colleagues forward?

But 'great' may not mean simply very good. In fact, a great leader may be the greatest risk for a practice.

Personality type

Those with a passing knowledge of Korean affairs may recall the grandfather of the current dictator, Kim Il-sung, who adopted the title of the Great Leader. Although he may have had a collegiate and consensual style for all I know, it seems likely that he was the kind of leader who expected to be followed rather than questioned.

A Macedonian called 'Alexander the Consensual' may not have achieved much in his short career. The style of a Kim Il-sung might be considered incompatible with the approach of even the most traditional law firm, but even more subtle forms of strong leadership can be risky.

Over the years, many solicitors firms have run into trouble under the stewardship of strong individual leaders. The highest risk arises in a small- or middle-size firm where the leader has been in place for a long time and is also the most significant contributor to fees.

The leader may have a strong personality and be difficult for other principals to engage in

effective debate. There may be no requirement for renewal of the leader's mandate by election. The relative strength of their personality may be mirrored by the relative weakness of the personality of others.

Sometimes very strong leaders actually have personality disorders. A number of firms that have eventually collapsed amid accusations of dishonesty and misconduct have been led by individuals who may well have been described as 'psychopaths'.

The high-risk leader may have been very successful. Innovative business ideas may have led to expansion. A taste for risk-taking may have paid off.

In one firm, a very energetic approach to using non-lawyer salesmen led to rapid expansion across numerous local offices. What followed was collapse and the leader's suicide.

In another, the pursuit of a system of unusual division into micro sub-specialisations wrecked the firm's finances. The leader was then able to raid client accounts for millions before being discovered by one of his partners.

He went to prison for many years. A lack of information and transparency in a firm's decision-making is certainly a risk factor.

Tribal warfare

Most cases, however, are not so extreme. The leader may simply

stop listening so that decisions are not the product of open discussion and consensus but of an individual's opinions or prejudices. The leader's belief may become more important



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than considering detailed facts.

A leader may be empowered by whichever group happens to be the strongest 'tribe' in the firm. Building a firm-wide consensus may, therefore, seem unnecessary. The poor relationships that follow the playing off of tribes against each other may mean that broad agreement on almost anything is too difficult.

Difficult decisions that are reached too easily without discussion are more likely to be bad ones.

Debate and consensus, however, take time and effort. The leader may be overstretched and juggling fee earning with many other tasks. Quick decisions may save time in the short term, although eventually bad consequences could follow.

Risks may be taken on the basis of past experience to the exclusion of the possibility that

conditions may have changed.

Although leadership that is too strong is risky, being too weak is likely to bring failure or at least stagnation. Successful leadership does not simply involve following consensus.

Many lawyers have a cultural antipathy to management and administrative systems. They are often resistant to change. Unsurprisingly, lawyers like arguing.

Leaders have to have authority and be trusted if they are to lead. Some particularly fractious firms undoubtedly have cultures that require strong leadership without which they simply could not operate. Many firms have failed because an absence of strong leadership has caused the practice to drift and, in due course, decline.

A firm's leadership does not arise in a vacuum but from a context. For better or worse, firms tend to get the leader they deserve. **SJ**



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