

How To Make Client-Focused Business Development Teams Happen...

With A Little Help From Henry Fonda



by William J. Flannery, Jr.

They're as essential to the success of a law firm as an Executive Committee. Client-Focused Business Development Teams, hereafter referred to as Client-Focused Teams, represent the ideal approach to business development for law firms because they are predicated on teamwork – although teamwork is the one cultural essential all too often lacking in that land of lone wolves. Client-Focused Teams are exactly what they sound like. A team of lawyers is formed, linked by common expertise, common industry knowledge, common interest and most importantly, a common client. The team identifies how to service the client, plans how to approach the client, pitch the client, and follows up afterward. It is a collective approach from beginning to end. It works better than any other approach for at least two fundamental reasons. First, the very existence of a Client-Focused Team gives clients what they want but seldom get:

an in-depth glimpse, not just of the sales skills of one premier rainmaker, but of the range of talent and expertise that will actually be assigned to their work if they do finally buy.

And second, the lawyers themselves learn by doing. Business development skills are disseminated throughout the firm. No longer are there just finders and minders (and never the twain shall meet). All team members are on their way to being rainmakers. Client consciousness and business development awareness permeate the institution to an even greater degree.

For many law firms, it is still a long road from where they are today to the reality of Client-Focused Teams. Adding to the problem is that all firms do actually have client teams already in place, but the communication levels within teams (not to mention cross-communication and cross-selling among the different teams) are

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woefully deficient. Business development efforts become veritable shadow acts with occasionally motivated lawyers more or less conspiring behind the scenes to commit random acts of business development.

Were there no teams at all in place, our chore might be easier. We could create new models from the ground floor. Instead, we have to grapple with existing groups that resist or even oppose new initiatives to increase communication and redefine the responsibilities of each team member.

How do we cut through the dead wood and plant a few healthy Client-Focused Team seedlings?

The first and foremost issue is leadership. It's tough enough for most law firms to induce leadership at the firm-wide management level. Client-Focused Teams require additional leadership material that can only be drawn from the rank and file of the partnership.

Finding the right material for that leadership is the first step. In this article, we will introduce some modeling criteria that firms can use in meeting the challenge – including a few strikingly useful prototypes drawn from the American cinema.

But finding the right leaders is only the first step. Beyond that, these leaders need to be armed with a number of best practices

designed to create, or recreate, Client-Focused Teams, and to manage team activities on a long-term basis.



Leadership: Style and Substance

It's not surprising that law firms suffer from a leadership dearth. Lawyers, after all, are essentially trained as artisans – highly intellectual artisans, but artisans nonetheless, with little of the organizational training that allows the corporate world to develop superior leaders within their ranks.

Like any other organization, a law firm can either select leaders or let those leaders evolve "organically;" in other words, self-select, either because they naturally assume responsibility or because their partners instinctively cede them that responsibility.

The organic approach is the most common one and, unfortunately, the least likely to be successful. Where there is no clear designated leader, a 10-30-60 rule applies.

My observations, based on thirty years of working with law firms, has shown that effective leaders happily emerge only 10 percent of the time. 30% of the time, the team drifts or disbands altogether.

Worst of all, 60% of the time, the reins are seized by someone with no intrinsic

leadership talent, but with a decidedly self-interested motive (money or power) for assuming command. In some instances, these non-leaders are positively dysfunctional individuals – not just lacking leadership qualities, but also by nature incapable of seeing beyond themselves. Clearly, the firms that will thrive over the long haul are those that consciously and thoughtfully select and develop their leaders. For these firms, there are two bits of interrelated good news. First, you don't have to be a leader yourself in order to recognize one. Second, leadership is not ineffable: there are specific traits that can be spotted as qualifying one of your partners for the job, including:

The Vision Thing. Leaders should be able to articulate some notion of what they want at the end of the day in terms of their own teams, their clients, and their firms. In business, "vision" can be summarized as a cogent answer to the burning question, "What Will Success Look Like?"

Call to Action. Which one of your partners really gets things done? Chances are, he or she could not have gotten so much done without inspiring others to help.

Focus. It's hard to get people to do things if you're so distracted they

won't think it's really that important!

Ethics. You can't lead people who don't trust you.

Self-deployment. The old saw, "I wouldn't ask you to do anything I'm not willing to do" is a cardinal leadership principle.

Opportunities for Others.

Generosity inspires; so does the perception that a leader can actually help his team members in their careers.

Motivates Others. You don't need locker room speeches. Instead, real leaders have an uncanny sense of what makes others want to act in a certain way.

Provides Resources. Leaders inspire when they make it easier to succeed, not harder.

Consensus builder. Valuing team members' input makes them feel like a part of the team.

Trustworthy communicator.

Leaders don't punish people for having opinions they don't agree with. Leaders who betray confidences won't lead for long.

A great lawyer. It's not necessarily a matter of technical skills, but a wise client counselor or creative practitioner earns respect, especially in the legal profession.

Team first, self second. Team members can always be inspired to serve the team when they sense that the leader has their best interest at heart.

You know these traits when you see them. Partners who exhibit all or most of these attributes should be groomed at once for leadership roles. The need is too great to waste the opportunity.



A Cinematic Exercise

Leadership selection naturally requires thoughtful deliberation among those making the selection. I would suggest a rather pleasant way to help guide these difficult deliberations: Sit down with your partners and watch a few movies!

Some years ago, The WJF Institute, the training consulting firm that I founded in 1989, invited Gene Kranz to keynote our client-only conference. Kranz was the mission control manager during the ill-fated Apollo 13 flight; his presentation included film clips about the Apollo program and its astronauts. These men were a collection of extreme individualists (top gun fighter and test pilots) who had learned to collaborate as a team, and to submerge their considerable

egos in a common cause. Kranz' message was clear and it wasn't lost on the audience. For law firms, popular culture provides additional messaging – not only about what a team is, and how team members must relate within the team – but about the kind of leadership that is possible in a environment governed by stress, and in a culture driven by centrifugal forces. While the movies offer us a number of leadership styles, the most interesting – because the most complex – are the positive examples. The villains are seldom interesting because, as leaders, they are one-dimensional. Take James Cagney's hateful scow captain in *Mister Roberts*. His style is based on simple disrespect. He punishes by depriving his men of privileges, which means he's treating them just as a rather uncreative parent treats a recalcitrant child. He cannot, and will not, inspire them to do anything of value, because he doesn't see any value in them.

Tragically enough, we saw the logical and extreme result of such autocratic and disrespectful leadership in Vietnam. "Fragging" is a forgotten term in use during that war. It referred to the killing of American officers by their own men. It was more common than we could imagine. The business equivalent of fragging is when

team members intentionally sabotage the team because they simply can't stand the leader.

By contrast, the men will move mountains for Mister Roberts, played by Henry Fonda, because they know he will do the same for them. As in most non-military professions, Mister Roberts is a superior among peers; the men sense that his authority is not willful or capricious, and that it is based solely on the fact that he has accepted his superior position as a matter of responsibility.

The value of our cinematic heritage for law firms struggling to identify leaders is in the variety of positive role models presented. A leader should have most of the attributes listed above, but the composite result can, from one Client-Focused Team to another, look very different. Consider:

Henry Fonda (again) in *Twelve Angry Men*. This is Socratic leadership at its most powerful. He doesn't ordain his vision.

Again, leadership is a responsibility more than a privilege. Fonda doesn't seek power. He fills a void that has to be filled. He only asks that each member of his team (and a jury is indeed a team) look deep within themselves, and be as honest with themselves as possible. He trusts the team members to respond with their best. Not all can or will respond like that. In the movie,

three characters remain unregenerate even though they do finally vote for acquittal.

William Shatner in *Star Trek*. The abiding fascination of Captain Kirk is that, as a starship commander, his power is formidable. But, to command that power, he must be demonstrably equitable, as the Star Fleet system doesn't tolerate Captain Queegs. Kirk happily accedes to, and relies on, the expertise of others. His authority represents a combination of the best qualities of those around him. He is a feeling man, but not as emotional as McCoy; he is intensely rational, but not as coldly logical as Spock. The leadership equation here is thus based on complementariness. His team members recognize themselves in him, but also see in him what they lack.

Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*. Like Fonda in *Twelve Angry Men*, this leadership style trusts to the team members; he allows them to discover themselves. Unlike Fonda, he is also exhortatory. He makes his value system eminently clear, and the fact that it is an iconoclastic style additionally appeals to young men who have been stifled in proprieties. Williams directly inspires in a way that Fonda does not. The Socratic Fonda leads in order to uncover the truth. The Dionysian Williams leads in order to liberate. The Fonda type tends to outlast the

Williams type, since the Williams type is often a moving target in a hostile world. Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*. No Roman leader can be weak or sentimental. But he can be fair, and the *Gladiator* is. He can be compassionate, and the *Gladiator* is. Crowe's leadership grows as he suffers, and the real test of it is his ability is – not to command as a general, when the men have no choice except to obey – to command when he returns as a former convict. At that point, his power is based on the quiet conviction which he radiates, and the almost certain knowledge on the part of his team members that he is right. They also know that he has paid his dues. He has undergone as many bad days as they have.

These are very different personalities, yet there are powerful connections, beginning with the leader's non-negotiable respect for the team members. The leader succeeds in getting his team members to do what they might not do on their own: acquit an innocent man, read romantic poetry, risk their lives in another galaxy or in the arena. For the most part, however, the key to this success is not by coercing, but by inspiring team members to reach within themselves for the strength to succeed.

Toward that end, we'd bet on Henry Fonda and William Shatner any day! Contrast them

to the typical leadership models that are easily observed at law firms and other organizations:

The Bean Counters. Their total reliance on the numbers to manage the firm is "timing the high jump". Numbers don't always reflect the reality of the challenges the people in the firm face.

The distant ones. They may not disrespect you like the captain in *Mister Roberts*. But they may not know your name or your contributions.

The Narcissus. The team is just an extension of his or her self-gratifying vision or will.

The autocrat. Occasionally the George C. Patton types win the crucial battle. But Eisenhower knew enough to replace Patton with Omar Bradley, "the soldier's general." Ike was positive it would make for a better, more stable global team, and he was right. In his best-selling *The Wisdom of Teams*, Jon Katzenbach uses the phrase "leaderless teams". These teams motivate themselves because they have been led to do so. Once there is mutual agreement on goals, the peer group takes over, and the leader leads only by advising where his or her advice is needed. But that is a point only a truly superior leader will ever reach.

Henry Fonda did not acquit the defendant in *Twelve Angry Men*. The jury did.



What Leaders Do

So you've found the ideal Henry Fonda to lead a Client-Focused Team targeting the biggest company in town, with some of the best litigators, corporate lawyers, and real estate lawyers in the firm volunteering for the team. Now what?

The first step is an orientation meeting – an especially important rite of passage, as it sends the message that the formation (or reformation) of the team represents a fresh start. Whatever else has been done to land the client in the past is important only as background. This is Day One of the campaign.

The meeting should last for one to two hours and cover:

- The role of the team leader
- The role of the team members
- Rules for working together

All data necessary for the team members to set their goals should be distributed at the meeting. For example, any available information on legal fees paid out by the company to other law firms is essential if the team is to get a handle on what it's really going after in terms of volume of new business.

It is important that the goals not only be specific, but that they are written down as well. True, there are myriad written documents (often expensive ones written by consultants) that get put on shelves and ignored in perpetuity. At the same time, the written word has a power of its own to command allegiance, especially among lawyers for whom it might have the implicit value of a contract.

Subsequent meetings will fill in the blanks. Circulate the agenda early for each meeting, so there can be no excuses for being unprepared or late.

During the early months of a team's existence, there is an especially acute need for the leader to communicate vision. It is important that leaders do so in different ways – not just speeches or memos or power-point presentations, but a combination of all of the above and more. By varying the communication media, the leader deepens and reinforces the message. Relying on just one approach can prove soporific. Team members won't say, "We've heard all that before" if they can hear it in different ways.

Teams fail because there are no established rules of behavior, because the members are constitutionally incapable of collaboration, because the leader is either coercive or

indifferent. The resistance to collaboration often reflects a lack of experience: people who haven't worked much with others need to be taught how. It is a particular problem for lawyers, since the legal profession involves a great deal of solitary work, and, consciously or unconsciously, many lawyers prefer to work alone and are attracted to the law for just that reason.

One solution lies in how you staff the team. Identify lawyers who have worked successfully in teams before, and make them the majority shareholders in the Client-Focused Team. They will outnumber and out-vote the loners.

Teams fail because they are impatient. Part of the leadership role is to understand that it takes time to become a team. He or she needs to be alternatively supportive and decisive, to communicate what is still required to forge the team links, and to reassure members that the right progress is being made. At the same time, the leader must be listening hard to every team member for indications of success and failure.

Teams fail because they prefer to self-medicate when professional help is clearly required. The objective and experienced perspective is always valuable.

Teams fail because there is a disconnect between the team and firm management.

The number of managing partners who would replace a majority of their practice group heads if they had their druthers is just astonishing. The team leader must have a viable relationship with key managers outside the team, and, by garnering positive feedback to team initiatives from those managers, further encourage team unity and resolve.



It Can Be Done

Law firms are culturally notorious. They are notorious because lawyers can be singularly self-absorbed – even in a marketplace like the current one, where competitive pressures demand a more collaborative approach to both client development and client retention. Yet nothing inspires like success, and many of our law firm clients that have seen the tangible results of these Client-Focused Teams.



Conclusion

Two facts are indisputable. One, collaborative teams succeed in generating more business than teams that are not collaborative. Two, great team leaders get their teams to accomplish things they could not do on their own, and they usually succeed at that, not by coercing, but by drawing out the inherent capabilities of their team members.

Unfortunately, there's a third fact confronting us: *the skills to lead Client-Focused Teams are not part of most lawyers' DNA*. Yet we know what traits define effective leadership, and most firms may certainly find a requisite number of partners who, for whatever happy chance or circumstance, approximate that paradigm.

Alternatively, law firms that recognize a dearth of leadership potential in their own ranks can take steps to improve. How? Firms can institute leadership skills programs to inculcate the qualities of true leaders. Some firms have already done so, but they make their mistake by limiting attendance only to those senior partners they already see as their leaders. These Client-Focused Teams can serve as the incubator for developing future leaders of the firm. If you can inspire a team to do business development and like it you can probably lead the firm to greater wealth, financially and culturally.

The next great step is to share the wealth: Train junior partners in leadership skills. Train associates. The firms that do so soonest will own the future.