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Consensus building: A necessity or a needless exercise?

In an earlier article on leadership, I talked about consensus building as a leadership tool.¹ Wikipedia defines consensus building as “a group decision-making process that seeks the consent of all participants”. Margaret Thatcher and Catherine Ashton present the extremes of the value of consensus building.

Thatcher said: “To me, consensus seems to be the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values, and policies. So it is something in which no one believes and to which no one objects.” On the other hand, Catherine Ashton supported consensus building as a decision-making process by saying: “I look for the consensus... [it] drives the policy into new places.”

How do these contrasting views fit into the make-up of a good leader?

Top-down approach

Few law firms have the time or inclination to embrace consensus building in its purest form. Even the most democratic of firms rarely spend the time to reach agreement on every decision.

Consensus building comes into play more often in adopting a strategic direction or vision for the firm. People follow only what they understand and believe. So, at first blush, creating a vision or strategy by consensus seems to be the ideal answer.

But, this simple approach can trap an unwary leader. He mistakes consensus building for leadership. To be successful, a leader cannot substitute consensus for a vision. He needs to have a vision and develop consensus around it, not the other way around. He must sell his vision to his constituents, but it must be his vision. Is this consensus building? Perhaps not in its purest form, but certainly in its most effective sense.

The successful leader does not ask whether he has consensus, but how he can develop it. He develops consensus from the top down, not the bottom up. He sets out a vision and then rallies

people behind it. It may not appear to be a top-down process but, in order to be successful, it must be. A leader without a vision who relies on consensus will have little success and shorter duration. His time should be spent building consensus behind his vision, not building a vision behind consensus.

Strategic direction

A good leader has two paramount jobs. First, he must set the strategic direction of the firm. Second, he must sell that direction to his constituents.

Former American football coach Al Groh believes that a good coach writes the last page of his playbook first. In short,

“Consensus building must be a top-down process”



he first decides where he wants his team to go. Then every decision is made and every page of the playbook is written to get them there. So it should be with consensus building: the managing partner sets the direction of the firm and then makes every decision to reach that goal.

To sell his strategic direction, the successful leader needs to utilize two forms of consensus building. First, the leader tests the limits of his strategy by

talking to his constituents to determine their comfort level. He has a strategy in mind and ‘tries it out’ on his partners. He will quickly know whether they will embrace his strategy and, if not, how he will have to modify it.

Shaping his vision by understanding what can be sold does not detract from leadership skills; rather, it enhances them. Knowing the firm’s limits and then setting the direction of the firm to fit those limits leads to success. Either setting a strategy without knowing the appetite of his partners or, in the alternative, letting them set the firm’s direction, leads to failure.

After the leader uses input from firm members to set the firm’s strategic direction, he then embarks on a second round of meetings to sell that vision. Some partners may want to do less, some may expect more. At the end of the day, the leader’s vision must be sold, bought and believed. This process may not fit a pure definition of consensus building, but it comes very close. More importantly, it’s efficient and effective.

In sum, consensus building is important, but it must be a top-down process. The leader must know where he wants to take the firm and sell that direction. To develop that vision, he must first understand how far the firm members will go. That knowledge may cause the leader to shape his vision in a different manner but, at the end of the day, it will still be his vision.

Leadership thought of the month: Being known as unassuming and unpretentious is not a bad thing. ^{mp}

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Endnote

1. See ‘Five keys to a successful strategic plan’, Julious P. Smith Jr, *Managing Partner*, Vol. 15 Issue 1, September 2012