

Lowering Organizational Barriers to Improve Communication and Collaboration By Robin Adwar

Summary

A regional professional services firm was struggling with some of the less positive aspects of rapid business growth. The desire to maintain a “small family firm culture vs. a territorial corporate culture, generational obstacles, and high turnover were combining to chip away at the firm’s effectiveness in the short term, as well as its long-term prospects for continued growth and stability.

Challenge

How to create a more collaborative, team-oriented environment that lowered barriers among colleagues, engendered firm loyalty, and facilitated the invaluable transfer of knowledge from the current senior partners to the firm’s next generation of leaders.

Greater Depth of Challenge

Rapid expansion had diluted the firm’s corporate culture. The lack of a formal process for managing growth had led to a disconnection between the “founding partners” and the future generation. The result was a lack of cohesiveness in the firm’s day-to-day operations, feelings of

isolation among the staff, and an unacceptable level of turnover.

The following communication challenges facing the firm were common to many growing professional services organizations:

- No formal process to ensure the transfer of knowledge and experience from one generation to the next. For this firm, this proved especially true in the areas of practice and financial management, resource recruitment and training, and new business development.
- Barriers to effective communication that caused stakeholders to judge each other’s management and leadership styles.
- A culture that did not encourage cross-generational collaboration, value diversity, nor recognize that mistakes were a necessary part of business and personal growth.

Solution

Soundboard planned and executed a two-day off-site retreat that included a Senior Partner Roundtable. A SoundBoard facilitator posed carefully crafted questions

that were designed to reveal the partners’ more human sides, from their backgrounds and education to hobbies, talents, and lives out of the office. Other questions focused on the partners’ opinions of the legal profession, aspirations for the firm, and the challenges associated with building a successful business.

“In working with the firm’s senior partners, we uncovered a wealth of knowledge and experience that was not filtering down to the rest of the staff,” says SoundBoard President Richard Magid. “We recommended the roundtable format as a way to break down barriers, share personal and professional experiences, and allow people to connect in ways they had never before.”

The Results

Says a senior partner, “The meeting prior to the facilitated roundtable created a

continued on back

Gaining on Gravity

Conquering the Changing Slope of Business Growth By Richard Magid

“It’s like pushing a boulder up a steep hill!” At one time or another, every business owner has uttered this statement. “Sometimes it feels like all this weight is ready to roll back over me!”

What a powerful metaphor for the challenges of entrepreneurship. Whether you’re starting a new venture, growing it to the next level, or getting close to realizing your full vision of success, the boulder-on-a-slope concept perfectly captures the many facets of business growth and transformation.

First, let’s start with the boulder itself. The boulder represents your product or service; more specifically, the ease of sale of your product or service. The harder it is to find, sell to and fulfill the needs of your prospective clients, the heavier your particular boulder will be.

Lightening the load

But here’s the good news. The weight lessens for businesses that take advantage of a clear need that exists in the marketplace, either by exploiting a highly specialized niche or by broadening its

continued on back

THE VALUE OF AN OFFSITE RETREAT

Today’s companies succeed or fail based largely on their ability to make good decisions and move forward with them quickly. Yet top leaders face significant dilemmas in guiding their senior teams.

An offsite team retreat provides a solution to these dilemmas: results-focused facilitation, a distinctive blend of business acumen and expert facilitation can help you:

- Build partnerships and teamwork while maintaining individual accountability
- Determine the best decision-making process
- Plan carefully without sacrificing rapid implementation
- To be heard without suppressing the voices of others
- Develop a process for post-meeting follow-through

Does it really need to be offsite? No it does not, however, holding a strategic planning meeting in the same old conference room where you hold daily, weekly or monthly meetings as well as possibly “eat lunch” can detract from the focus required to really step out of the day to day and get the larger, strategic things done.

Brainstorming, sharing thoughts and creating a plan in a fresh environment can be a great opportunity for a leader and his team to effect change.

Lowering Barriers continued

safe environment for us to communicate; it allowed us to say things to each other that we might have never said otherwise. We were more aware of some things. The value of the roundtable experience was not in the specific information we shared, but that we humanized ourselves and showed a sense of humor."

Junior partners agreed that "the exercise was a valuable first step in opening channels of communication and building trust." One commented that it demonstrated an important commitment that she hadn't felt before. "The roundtable showed a tremendous intention on the part of Senior Management to grow and plan for the future. "Knowing that they are thinking about a legacy provides a great sense of security."

Gaining on Gravity continued

services to attract a wider audience.

As you consider your company's product and service offerings, ask yourself: Have we defined a truly unique selling proposition? Is there an emotional need for prospective clients to buy from us? Have we identified and articulated a clear return on investment for their purchase? The more your organization can answer "yes" to these questions, the lighter the weight of the boulder you're pushing up the hill.

Why push alone?

Now, let's take a look at the act of pushing the rock. We all know it's hard to build and sustain a business by yourself. As you build a team (real or virtual) to support your efforts, these additional hands can be used to push - or at the very least support your back as you shoulder most of the weight. You'll quickly notice that the pushing gets easier as your team gets stronger.

The greatest benefit of a team - whether employees, partners, or like-minded collaborators - is the additional support it offers. These hands (in reality, diverse skill sets) complement one another and help move your business forward.

Good managers will have their hands securely on your back. Dedicated employees will help push the boulder forward. Strong collaboration, leading to greater commitment and buy-in among your team, will always make the pushing go more smoothly.

When you take your eye off the ball (or your hands off the boulder), committed team members will fulfill their roles and help you maintain forward momentum. The standards and expectations you've established for your organization will support the push forward.

Cutting down on resistance

Unfortunately, the laws of nature dictate that certain factors will always be present to push against the boulder. In business, these are most commonly people issues: negative attitudes, partners who are not communicating well (or at all), misguided management, or employees whose roles and responsibilities have not been clearly outlined.

More than a year later, the Roundtable continues to have an impact. As the firm continues its rapid expansion, all partners remain committed to fostering a sense of inclusion and collaboration. "By actively ingraining openness and communication into our culture," says one, "we're taking the necessary steps toward creating a legacy firm."

As the growth continues in this professional services firm, the relationship with SoundBoard continues as well. The commitment on both parts to keep the momentum moving forward, to manage the growth, encourage diversity, and embrace a more collaborative culture is evident.

Resistance can also come from a misalignment of your business values and vision. Consider if these factors are interfering with your organization's progress up the hill:

- Not operating in alignment with the clearly stated values that represent your corporate culture.

- Not having a unified vision; one that has been articulated to all levels of the company.

If your company's vision is not clear to your team - worse, if there are multiple or contradictory visions floating around - you're adding unnecessary resistance to your boulder. Lose the extra baggage by re-examining your short and long-term objectives, then outlining specific action steps to start moving toward them.

Slope: *the final factor in the equation.*

Once we've identified ways to reduce the weight of the boulder, add helping hands, and cut down on needless resistance, it's time to shift our focus to the slope of the hill itself.

In theory, as a business matures and builds a satisfied client base, the hill will naturally level out or even start to slope downward. These situations - from enjoying the ride to steering clear of the cliff - present their own equally vexing challenges, but that's the subject of another article entirely!

For the moment, let's concentrate on ways to reduce the slope of your hill. Opportunities exist in nearly every area of your business, from a clear positioning statement, a well-trained sales team, and a fully developed marketing strategy to strong vendor relationships, supportive hiring policies, and up-to-date technology. As diverse as they seem, these factors all contribute to making your company run like a well-oiled machine...and cut down on the incline accordingly.

One important addition to the list: the wise counsel of a trusted advisor. Whether it's a business coach, a peer advisory group or a formal board of directors, nothing reduces the incline in your favor like an objective voice.

As you reflect where your business stands on the hill to success - and the weight of the boulder you're currently

BOOK CORNER

A recent poll (August 2007) by the Associated Press showed that "1 in 4 adults read no books last year". At SoundBoard we recently asked our clients to share a book (any genre) that they had read recently that they enjoyed and/or had an impact on them. We would like to share that list with you in the hopes that you will pick one up before the year ends.

"The Little Red book of Selling: 12.5 Principles of Sales Greatness", Jeffrey Gitomer

"Now, Discover Your Strengths", Marcus Buckingham

"Strengths Quest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond", Donald O. Clifton

"Don't Sweat the Small Stuff at Work: Simple Ways to Minimize Stress and Conflict While Bringing Out the Best in Yourself and Others", Richard Carlson

"Einstein: A Biography", Jurgen Neffe and Shelley Frisch

"Harvey Penick's Little Red Book: Lessons and Teachings from a Lifetime in Golf", Harvey Penick

"The Woods", Harlan Coben

"Ask & It Is Given", Jerry Hicks and Esther Hicks

"The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It" by Michael E. Gerber

"Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets of Success, One Relationship at a Time" by Keith Ferrazzi and Tahl Raz

"Growing Your Business!" by Mark LeBlanc

"The Trusted Advisor" by David H. Maister, Robert Galford and Charles Green

"The Ultimate Gift" by Jim Stovall

"Think and Grow Rich" by Napoleon Hill

"The Art of War" by Sun Tzu

"Hug Your Customer: The Proven Way to Personalize Sales and Achieve Astounding Results" by Jack Mitchell

"Love Is the Killer App: How to Win Business and Influence Friends" by Tim Sanders

"The Reagan Diaries" by Ronald Reagan

"Winning" by Jack Welch and Suzy Welch

"The Energy Bus: 10 Rules to Fuel Your Life, Work, and Team with Positive Energy" by Jon Gordon

"The China Study: The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted and the Startling Implications for Diet, Weight Loss and Long-term Health" by T. Colin Campbell, Thomas M. Campbell II, John Robbins, and Howard Lyman

supporting - recognize that it's all part of the normal evolution of every business journey. The incline may become more or less taxing, the boulder's weight more or less burdensome, but the challenges they represent will always exist in one form or another. It's how and with whom you tackle them that makes all the difference.

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