

A Law Firm Is a Jazz Band

By Barend Blondé and Antoine Henry de Frahan

The ultimate challenge of law firms is to create synergy between the brilliant but colourful experts inhabiting them. Law firms like to use the metaphor of the symphonic orchestra to indicate how seamlessly members of the firm cooperate. However, law firms with the ambition to operate like a harmonious orchestra hit the wrong chord. Their leadership and management model for the firm is out of key.

There is a broad consensus in the legal market that, for high-end legal work, the bundling of forces is the only viable management model for the future. The era of the individual legal expert is behind us. We have entered the era of the legal expert collectivity. Individual experts have become a commodity. Today, the added value, under the form of creativity, innovation and efficiency, is generated by lawyers who manage to work in teams, as centres of excellence. This is a natural evolution, similar to what happens in other areas of economic activity.

From one-man-bands to the orchestra

Originally, the lawyer performed as a 'one-man-band'. As a generalist, he played various instruments at the same time: the lawyer advised its clients on several, if not all, fields of law. He then discovered that it would be more efficient and more profitable to limit himself to a single instrument: the soloist – specialist – took over the stage. And it was nice being out in the spotlights, in front of a thoughtful and obedient crowd.

But all good things must come to an end. The crowd grew smarter, larger, more demanding, more knowledgeable. The most enterprising ones amongst the lawyers realized that the specialist model was ready for an 'accelerando'. They grouped in partnerships and with their big horn they out blew everything and everyone. The soloists/specialists were banned to the supporting act and the one-man-bands which remained, were blown off the stage.

However, featuring on the bill together does not equal 'playing together'. Hiring communication specialists to produce glossy brochures and fancy websites presenting the assumingly tuned-in specialists to the outside world, is the easy part. The expectations of clients are raised, which brings us to the hard part: law firms must now demonstrate that they can actually deliver and make all these specialists play together seamlessly. This requires leadership. And hence we reach the model of the orchestra. Leadership or 'governance' in law firms is often compared to the task of a conductor: this conductor –

some firms have several- ensures that the soloists in the orchestra pit play together neatly, harmoniously performing an unequalled piece of music.

This comparison misses the point completely. The partnership should not be an obedient orchestra, the leader not a conductor. If that is the case, in the long term, the firm will be condemned to mediocrity: it will mainly perform existing pieces, but will not compose many new masterworks, it will attract sound musicians, but lose virtuosos, it will receive polite applause, but no requests for encores. Finally: its wages will be pressured due to the stinging competition with other orchestras.

From the orchestra to the jazz band

The personality of the lawyer is a decisive element in the value he delivers. Lawyers have to be strong, independent, rather self-willed figures. As clients, that is what we expect from our lawyers, our litigators, our deal makers. That's why we trust them to solve our problems. One cannot expect lawyers to be strong personalities, acting as "towers of strength" for their clients, and at the same time force them to unresistingly conform to processes, systems and policy memos. Or to conductors for that matter. The orchestra model only has two outcomes. Either the internal frustration increases because conductor and musicians are constantly bickering and the orchestra becomes a cacophony. Or the conductor celebrates a pyrrhic victory and he turns the ensemble into to a corps of obliging yes-men, condemned to mediocrity and, in the long end, condemned to fail.

The most valuable law firms act like jazz bands. A jazz band departs from the specific strength of the individual and the individual enriches the collective. It stimulates the individual musician to personal completion and allows him, from time to time, his glorious moment. The band is steeped in respect for the other. Jazz bands are also led, but the leader is an integral part of the band, subjected to the interest of the band. He cultivates communication and spontaneity, diversity and creativity. His main aim: creating a surrounding which enables the individual to surpass himself to hence lift the collective to a higher level.

The April issue of TopLegal International had an interesting piece on the extraordinary success of Latham & Watkins. In the article Chairman Bob Dell, one of the longest-serving leaders in the international legal market, receives the credit for Latham's exploit from his fellow partners: "Bob Dell is not forceful but a persuasive manager. He doesn't impose his will but listens, discusses and explains. He runs things on a measured and consensual basis. If he hears another viewpoint that improves on a strategy or suggestion, he is willing to revise his position."

Bob Dell is not a conductor. He is a jazz band leader.

From the jazz band to the law firm leader

Metaphors are fun but what does the jazz band metaphor mean in practice for lawyers with leadership responsibilities in law firms? (And we don't limit leadership to the person of the managing partner. Leadership is also requested from practice group leaders, from lawyers heading marketing or from HR committees.) The modern law firm leader possesses three important qualities:

- Leaders are top performers. Like the jazz band leader, the law firm leader is an integrated part of the band. He has demonstrated the skills and obtained the results he wants to develop or achieve on firm level. Lawyers will only accept authority from people whom they respect for their achievements. This is why it is so hard for non-lawyer managers to be successful in leadership positions.
- Leaders focus on their vision. Like jazz bands, a bit of chaos is never far away in a thriving and buzzing law firm. Leadership is not about fighting the chaos, it's about managing it and making sure that, between the unexpected events, the peaks and the small fires, the long term goals are not lost out of sight.
- Leaders are patient mediators. Successful leaders are not conductors, they are mediators. They listen more than they talk; they prefer convincing and involving to imposing; they understand the power of the spotlight but only to put it on someone else.

Some people try to convince us that in a few years time, law firms will be listed on the stock markets. Here's an investment tip. To know from which firm to buy shares, look for the firms that have jazz band like leadership and make sure you keep their shares for a long time.

The authors are partners with FrahanBlondé (www.frahanblonde.com), a consultancy focusing on professional services. More articles are available on www.legal-management.net.