

PETER SCOTT CONSULTING

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“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man”

George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 1903

The quote above instantly resonated with me when I first read it and related it to the world of law firms and other professional businesses. However, making progress does not have to depend on the ‘*unreasonable man*’ (although unfortunately in many firms it still does); progress can be achieved despite the ‘*unreasonable man*’, and in this first Briefing Note of 2022, I will share with you my thoughts on how to do so.

Understand WHY the ‘unreasonable man’ does not wish to adapt to the changing world

People have all kinds of reasons for not wanting to ‘go with the flow’, and engaging the ‘*unreasonable man*’ in discussion can often lead to a solution. Sometimes having a dialogue can even reveal surprising reasons for being unwilling to change.

An example of this which comes to mind, and which illustrates well why it is so important to understand the thinking of the ‘*unreasonable man*’ was a performance / behaviour exercise I carried out with a law firm some years ago. I interviewed the partners on a confidential basis and many of them mentioned a partner who was senior and held a great deal of sway within the firm, and was generally well regarded. However, for the previous fifteen years that particular partner had been saying ‘No’ to every proposal which would have brought about beneficial change to the firm, and they put this down to his being naturally cautious and conservative in nature and thought he had the best of intentions by trying to stop them making what he considered might be costly mistakes. However, there was also a feeling that he had been holding back the firm.

I eventually interviewed the partner concerned and asked him why he had for years been saying ‘No’ to proposals for change? His answer was surprising and did not reflect well on him. He said -

“The stupid people, don’t they understand what I have been doing? Partners’ meetings bore me, and so I lob a grenade in to liven things up!”

Once that became known within the firm, that partner never again raised objections to any proposals for change and that firm has gone from strength to strength.

Focus on what is important

I sometimes find that firms looking to adopt a 'change culture' too often discuss the need to change in quite general terms, instead of tightly focusing on those important areas of a business which urgently need to be transformed if a firm is to obtain a competitive advantage over its rivals.

The ability to focus on what is important for this purpose means we can see things more clearly, and developing a strategic **clarity** should be at the heart of planning a distinct strategic intent. Identifying in this focused manner what is important and needs to change in a firm, and being clear as to why such change is needed, should be among the first steps to take to countering the influence of the '*unreasonable man*'.

The important areas of a firm's business on which to focus for this purpose should be:

- **The ability to anticipate, and to respond to, clients' needs**

To successfully compete, a law firm has to outperform its rivals in the ways required by its clients, and the ability to provide clients with the expertise and 'added value' clients now require to ensure longer term client satisfaction, is paramount. Obtaining **client feedback** is likely to reveal how a firm may need to change in terms of its expertise, its delivery of results and how its clients see 'added value' being provided. Once feedback is given, then clients will expect changes to be made, and this can be a powerful tool to use to secure the necessary changes, even in the face of opposition from the '*unreasonable man*'.

- **The way its people work and how their performance is managed and rewarded**

To achieve the standards of performance required by its clients, a law firm must ensure that it has access to highly trained, skilled, and motivated people who are high achievers and who will need to know in which key areas their performance will be measured, their performance goals, how their performance rates against these goals and crucially how their performance will be rewarded. This will require active management of its people if a firm is to outperform its rivals.

Peer pressure, developed by responses to *confidential internal questionnaires* regarding how people are prepared to change the ways in which they perform and behave, and by *confidential 360° feedback* on colleagues' performance and behaviour, can be another powerful tool to use to obtain buy-in to changing standards of performance and behaviour.

An example of how this can be usefully used is in relation to a current 'hot' topic of debate in many law firms - the issue of **how partners should be rewarded**.

Reward is a strategic issue because being able to reward people appropriately is vital if a firm is to be able to recruit and retain the best people and to get the best out of people. Gauging internal opinion on a confidential basis is often necessary if a firm is to change the way it rewards its partners. This is likely to be the case in particular if there is the prospect of moving from a traditional lockstep system based solely on seniority and years as a partner to a more contribution-based approach. With the support of a large majority in favour of such change (think the 80/20 rule), a managing partner may then feel strong enough to face up to the *'unreasonable man'* and the reactionary internal forces holding back a firm.

The advice I would give to the *'unreasonable man'* would be to suggest he reads for his own benefit and wellbeing, one of the best books on change I have read, (*"A survival guide to the stress of organisational change"*, Price Pritchett & Ron Pound, 1997 Pritchett & Associates, Inc.) –

"The organisation is going to change – it must – if it is to survive and prosper. Rather than banging your head against the wall of hard reality and bruising your spirit, invest your energy in making quick adjustments. Turn when the organisation turns. Practice instant alignment"

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