

Taking The Lead – Balancing Opposing Views

Over the past number of weeks, I have had the great fun of interviewing leaders and retired leaders of law firms, large and small, in all parts of the globe.

Many themes emerged but one that struck me is the ever-present balance of polarities. Consider the contest between the self and the firm. There is also the tension between those partners who want to invest in the future and those who want to strip-mine the place. Or the challenge between those partners who want to be part of a large international platform and those who wish to remain independent. This column explores how to sort through such opposing views.

Lawyers are trained advocates, so all too often a difficult conversation becomes a conflict that quickly moves from a debate of the issues to a debate between people. Me against you when we both think we are right rather than the two of us tackling the dilemma before us.



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President



According to philosopher, author and consultant Peter Koestenbaum, the central attribute of leadership is the ability to manage polarity.

Polarity Mapping

Polarities are two opposing but possible points of view. For example: team versus individual as a way of working; independent versus merger; competitive versus collaborative; short term versus long term. In these examples both are possibilities worthy of exploration. Both possibilities can be successful.

To explore the tension between two possible paths forward, consider the opposing views as the right and left poles in Figure 1. Then explore the upside, or greatest hope, and the downside, or worst fears.

Polarity Mapping



The magic happens when you have two partners with differing views on the same side of the issue trying to sort it through. You can move your group from an argument to an exploratory conversation.

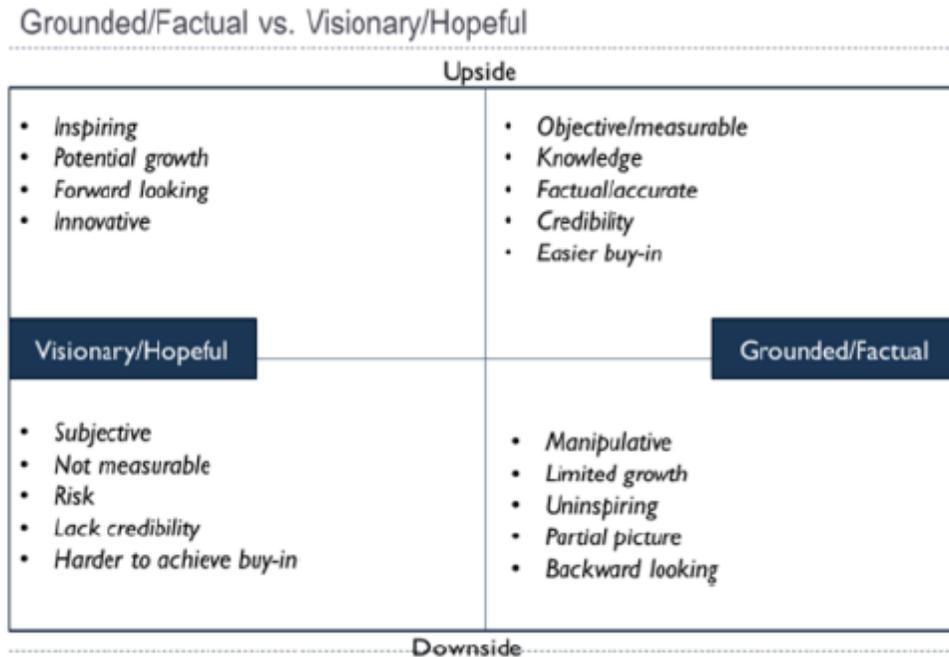
When the group has fully explored the upside and downside, challenge its members to take it one step further. Debate is one thing; action is quite another. For both the left and right positive quadrants, ask your colleagues to identify the action steps they would take to move the possibility closer to reality.

In my recent meetings with leaders, many have cited the red flags that were obvious and everywhere now that they look back on a poor decision. Challenge your team to identify the red flags or early warning signs relative to the left and right negative quadrants. Perhaps by identifying the early warning signs before they happen, those red flags might be recognized as they flutter before you like a bull fighter's red cape.

Polarities of Leadership Philosophy

As a leader you need to be able to explore different possibilities in terms of your approach or style. Situation and audience may guide your approach but the ability to sort through your own thinking can be powerful. For example, try this your self with the following:

- Candor and Diplomacy
- Discipline and Entrepreneurship
- Confidence and humility



A group of high-achieving young partners in an international law firm explored a range of possibilities, and Figure 2 reflects the results of their discussion as they explored the upside and downside of a grounded/factual approach and a visionary/hopeful approach.

Power of the "And"

It is possible, for example, to invest in the future and it is possible to maximize profits today (also known as strip-mining). It is possible, and indeed likely, that you will have both A players and B or C players in your partnership. The challenge is that a firm full of hired guns is a very different firm with a completely different market positioning than a mixed practice firm that is very good. Remaining independent is a path that some partnerships choose, whereas joining a national or international firm is also possible. A firm that fosters entrepreneurship can also have a modicum of discipline. The conclusion here is that there is a way to explore the two possibilities fully and recognize the red flags when they begin to flap.



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