

Is fear holding you back?

Margaret Beaton 26 February 2013

In my work with clients in professional services firms there's a topic that is all too often taboo. It's fear.

Fear pervades the corridors of too many firms. It's disruptive and distressing.

The fear to which I refer is not the common or garden variety of today's tough economic conditions. It's not about the flat economy; the firm's debt levels; pressures on take home pay for partners; or adverse changes in the external environment that are cutting swathes through many professions.

It's fear of another kind that is unspoken and more sinister. It's covert and fearful individuals are left to deal with it themselves. It's fear related to insecurity and concerns about due process and fairness.

This fear affects several categories of partner. Those whose practices are declining and whose performance and contribution to the firm are not what they used to be. These partners usually know they should be letting go and anxiously ask themselves in the still of the night "What should I do?". They wonder "What *they* will do" where they are those in the firm—elected and sometimes self-appointed—have to broach the question of performance and the inevitable decisions related to tenure and profit share.

There are those who want to step up into equity and greater reward for the years of toil and sacrifice. Many of these younger partners fear the powers that be—who are all too often not fully identified—will not be fair in what they offer and what they ask. These partners fear pushing back and questioning the criteria and processes that are applied. The dark art of promotion to equity is opaque and worrisome.

And finally, the firm's leaders are fearful of upsetting the heavy hitters and big rainmakers by their actions—or lack thereof.

Causes. The causes of a climate of unspoken fear are many and inter-related. At the centre I almost always find a clumsy, poorly administered performance management system. Well intentioned as these systems are, their genesis, design and implementation are all-too-often a cause of unnecessary grief—and fear for both the recipients and givers of the feedback and ensuing decisions. The manner in which partners feel they are treated threatens their sense of identity, self-confidence and well-being.

And because the discomfort caused by both the imperfections of the system and the distress and damage it causes, too many firms put it in the too hard basket. And avoid the hard work and time required to work through the challenges. They fear a breakdown in collegiality. And they fear being the first to throw a stone in the biblical sense.

Consequences. These fears result in avoidance and denial. This state leaves the firm ill prepared for crises associated with under-performance. It only responds at the last minute to the voices of peak performers who feel it's unfair to tolerate those they perceive as not pulling their weight. In these circumstances there's insufficient time for considered consultation, remediation and dignified letting go.

Summary decisions are made and poorly communicated. Angst is everywhere.

A vicious cycle grips the firm. Fear leads to denial and avoidance. In turn these lead to inaction. Tensions heighten and problems deepen. Fear is exacerbated. And so it goes. Everyone loses.

If this sounds familiar and close to home, or least some of it does, you can do something about it.

Don't let it happen to you, whatever your role in the firm. Put the topic on the agenda. Bring it to the surface. Deal with it. Now.

This is an 'undiscussable', an elephant in the room. Skilled help is often needed to break the silence and collusion.

You may find these additional readings helpful in understanding this important topic:

- + [Could this be you?](#) This was one of my most popular posts in 2012.
- + [No firm or partner is immune to succession challenges](#)

The second is a post linked to my 2012 research report on [Succession Challenges in PSFs](#) July 2012 – this report may also be downloaded as a PDF file.

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