

**Recognizing
the good,
the bad
and the
ill-fitting.**

By Anne Collier

Culture Matters

*Individuals play the game, but teams
beat the odds.* —Navy SEAL saying

How do you define firm culture? When lawyers say, “this is the way we do it,” they’re often unknowingly describing their firm’s culture. But it’s not just about how a firm approves business development expenditures or whether it is boisterous or reserved. Culture is about how people work together—it’s about teamwork. Analyzing a firm in terms of what it takes to create “effective teamwork” does more than label its culture good or bad; it assesses how a firm’s culture works and, more important, whether the firm is a fit for you. “Effective teamwork” is brought about by the five-step iterative process of transforming a group into a team that achieves great results.

Why is culture important, you ask? A firm’s culture is important because it determines what you will need to succeed. If you can’t work effectively with your colleagues, or if they don’t respect your ability to solve problems, you will languish and have an even more difficult time finding your next position.

Consider this: Lawyers collaborate to more effectively solve a broad range of client problems. Let’s call these types of problems Problem A. Now consider this: Most of us recognize that we work better with some people than others. It doesn’t have anything to do with liking or disliking a person, it’s that differences in problem-solving style can cause the kind of strife that derails collaborations. This strife is what we refer to as Problem B. Lawyers who have figured out how to

minimize interpersonal strife—Problem B—use diversity to foster better problem-solving of a broader range of Problem As, that is, client problems. Their firms are more likely to provide excellent client services and be better places to work for a broader range of people.

Answering two questions will give you insight to determine fit:

1. Do a firm’s lawyers collaborate effectively?
2. If so, is my problem-solving style similar to the firm’s dominant problem-solving style? That is, do I fit in seamlessly or does the firm value and appreciate lawyers with diverse problem-solving styles like mine?

If you can answer yes to both questions, the firm will likely be a good fit.



The text below sets forth the Five Steps to Create Effective Teamwork—that is, a good culture—and applies the Effective Teamwork Model to both a job seeker and a merger.

STEP 1 Build Trust

Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.
—Henry Ford

Building trust is the first step in creating effective teamwork and an important determinant of culture. A culture in which trust exists between colleagues, the firm and its processes saves everyone time because colleagues who trust each other:

- Don't hide mistakes.

- Get right to the point.
- Develop collaboration norms so they don't have to renegotiate with each new interaction.
- Are not defensive because they don't fear others' intentions.

Having trust means that people can rely on each other for support and to resolve client, career and firm challenges. To trust a colleague, you need to believe that the person is reliable, competent, benevolent and caring, open, and has integrity.

Building a culture in which colleagues trust each other takes time. Working, traveling, lunches and firm retreats build trust. Success depends on the lawyers of the firm making a periodic investment in relationships. While much of this happens as a natural consequence of working together,

it also requires deliberate maintenance, especially when a challenge to trust occurs. In an effective teamwork culture, colleagues are willing to address misunderstandings in a solution-focused manner rather than blame-focused manner.

STEP 2 Harness Diversity

When two people in business always agree, one of them is unnecessary.
—William Wrigley, Jr.

In those cultures in which unique thinking is viewed as an asset, lawyers appreciate colleagues who think differently. Thus diversity is not just about race, gender or generation. It's about different ways of thinking, working and problem-solving.

It's about cognitive diversity. Remember, most problems are multifaceted and complex and consequently require lawyers with different problem-solving styles and perspectives. This is achieved by taking the time to listen to one another, ask questions, probe and push back, all so that the team can find the best possible answer. Divergent opinions cause colleagues to consider what they might be missing.

The challenge of any diverse group is not mistaking differences in style for a low level of ability, creativity or problem-solving. Problem-solving style is *how* a person solves problems. Level is *how well* a person solves problems.

What makes this possible, sustainable and valuable is trust. When lawyers know that the debate is about the issue and not posturing for personal gain, the focus is truly on the issue. Remember, passionate debate is necessary to the firm's and even individual lawyers' success because it produces the best solution in the shortest period of time.

STEP 3 Achieve Commitment

If team members don't weigh in, they don't buy in.

Effective teamwork requires the ability to commit to choices. Whether and how a firm's lawyers work together to achieve commitment determines culture. If colleagues are able to truly harness diversity through unfiltered debate about the issues, they will commit to decisions even when those decisions are in opposition to their own views. Cultures in which all opinions and ideas are put on the table and considered can achieve buy-in. While consensus is not required, a willingness to commit to a decision is. So ask, 'Is the firm's culture one in which everyone weighs in and their opinions are valued?'

STEP 4 Embrace Accountability

Accountability means that team members are themselves inspired to do their best work and to support others in doing their best work at all times.

Accountability is a tool for achieving goals, a necessary element of effective teamwork, and determines culture. Effective teamwork requires a culture in which accountability is supportive; it identifies what worked, what didn't and what is needed for success. Fear of punishment doesn't create accountability. Accountability occurs directly among team members and requires the team's leader to confront difficult issues in a supportive manner.

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STEP 5 Focus on Goals

Team members must compete with each other, not against each other.

What distinguishes a great firm from lawyers sharing office space and expenses is the shared risks and rewards for the results achieved for clients. This shared consequence fosters a sense of urgency to create effective teamwork and determines culture. This creates the incentive for subjugating personal goals and ambitions to firm goals and serving clients. The reason this works for the individual lawyers is because individual lawyers can only succeed when the firm succeeds. In

other words, there cannot be individual success when the firm fails, especially if the lack of teamwork contributes to the failure.

The following examples demonstrate how the effective teamwork analysis can be applied to both a job seeker and a merger to determine fit.

FINDING THE RIGHT FIT: THE JOB SEARCH

Meet Kelly. Right out of law school, Kelly joined the Justice Department, Civil Litigation Division and is now looking for a private sector job. Kelly has friends who love their work and friends who don't. Kelly wants to be sure to find the right fit in a firm. After talking with colleagues and reading about firm cultures, Kelly applies the Five Steps to Create Effective

Teamwork to determine whether D.C.-based Medium Law is a good fit.

During interviews at the firm, Kelly pays particular attention to whether the lawyers at Medium Law seem on edge—not just engaged and focused on the seemingly never-ending demand of the work, but on edge. Do they seem fulfilled by their work? Kelly also asks how colleagues work together. How do lawyers from the firm's multiple offices collaborate? What are examples of cross-selling and working with other groups within the firm that have been successful? How often are the firm's retreats and team meetings? Kelly even attends a weekly Litigation Group lunch, looking for signs of effective teamwork. Kelly notices that

5 STEPS TO CREATE EFFECTIVE TEAMWORK



the lawyers good-naturedly rib each other and engage in a robust discussion on a split in the circuits. Kelly also notices that the more junior lawyers participate in the discussion and overhears lawyers scheduling time to talk about client work.

Based on these observations, Kelly concludes that the firm manifests the signs of a good culture. In other words, lawyers seem to trust each other and value each other's opinions.

Kelly is almost ready to accept the job. However, the question in Kelly's mind is, Do I fit with the firm's dominant culture? On the one hand, Kelly reasons, the Litigation Group members seem to care about each other and, importantly, value each others' opinions and perspectives. On the other hand, they are boisterous and perhaps overly outgoing in contrast to Kelly's somewhat reserved nature. Kelly also notices that the group's lawyers seem not to focus on details—they're a little cowboyish in their thinking. And yet Kelly likes the firm and doesn't want to forego a good opportunity because of a little cognitive diversity. Besides, Kelly reasons, they

seem to appreciate the differences.

Kelly asks to meet with a few of the firm's quieter lawyers and determines that they seem happy, fulfilled and successful. Determining that the firm is a fit, Kelly takes the job.

CREATING A GOOD FIT: THE MERGER

Tracey and Chris are managing partners of their respective firms. They are considering a merger for all of the right business reasons. The firms each have good cultures but are very different. Tracey's firm—Tech Law Partners—is innovative and cutting edge. Chris' firm—Staid & True Partners—is traditional and risk-averse. Tracey and Chris are concerned

that their firms' wildly divergent cultures will derail an otherwise successful merger. They are concerned about Problem B. There are already rumblings at Tech that the lawyers at Staid are boring and a buzzkill. The lawyers at Staid are equally concerned that Tech lawyers are not just cutting edge, but over the edge.

Tracey and Chris are familiar with the Effective Teamwork Model. Committed to all the benefits of merging, they decide to apply the principles of the model to their merger. The first step is for the firms' lawyers to spend enough time with each other that they feel comfortable, that they are given the opportunity to build trust. They know that lunches and cocktail parties aren't enough though. They also know that as different as their partners are from each other, they all appreciate frameworks for analyzing issues. To better understand each other's culture, each firm defines its own culture and problem-solving style via the Effective Teamwork Model. They present to each other en masse, which not only fosters understanding, but also demonstrates that they have established a certain level of trust by the diversity of views expressed and a focus on how the differences in their respective firms can add to the value of service they provide to their clients. They conclude by listing the steps each lawyer is willing to take to make that goal a reality.

In summary, culture is critical to individual and firm success. Those who ignore its implications do so at their peril. **LP**



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