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Getting your team ‘on the balcony’ to promote adaptability

Dogmatic rather than pragmatic leadership will prevent law firms from adjusting to the changing circumstances in the legal market, but incorporating more reflective time into day-to-day operations can make a difference, writes Keegan Luiters.

Thomson Reuters Institute’s 2021 report on the State of the Legal Market in Australia speaks to the experience of many lawyers.

It states that “expectations have shifted over the past year across legal markets in Australia. While the market has presented rapid ups and downs as well as periods of relative calm ... it has been a stomach-turning ride for many”.

The report also highlights how broad the range of experiences has been across different parts of the legal market based on multiple factors – such as location (for example, Perth had a much larger increase in demand compared with other cities) and practice area (regulatory demand soared while Insolvency & Restructuring demand reduced).

In short, this increasing number of influences on a firm’s performance, along with decreasing predictability both inside and outside of organisations, is increasing the complexity of the environments in which leaders and teams within law firms are working. For leaders in law firms who remain dogmatic rather than pragmatic, there is a huge risk that, without being attentive to the shifting circumstances in which they operate, they can become experts at solving yesterday’s problems – instead of today’s and tomorrow’s issues.

One great way to sense and respond to these changes is to do what has been described as ‘getting on the balcony’. In their book, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky state that:

“To diagnose a system or yourself while in the midst of action requires the ability to achieve some distance from those on-the-ground events. We use the metaphor of ‘getting on the

balcony’ above the ‘dance floor’ to depict what it means to gain the distanced perspective you need to see what is really happening.”

Many leaders and teams struggle to implement these principles. Below are some of the common barriers to getting on the balcony and some tips about how leaders and teams can do it better and more consistently.

One of the main reasons that teams don’t get time to reflect and review with perspective is the same as the reason they need to. They are busy. A team’s capacity – more than its skills or ability to work together – is often the limiting factor for its performance. This means that there is limited time available and the idea of stopping to reflect on how the team is performing seems like a luxury that they can’t afford – especially when there is a keen eye being kept on billable hours.

Another reason is that when teams do carve out the time to stop, they often don’t have a clear sense of what they are hoping to achieve through that time. It doesn’t feel like real and valuable work. Hence, they will continue being busy on the dance floor, instead of gaining the perspective from the balcony that can guide better decisions and actions for the team. As such, the reflective time seems ineffective and makes future attempts at reflection harder to get into the calendar.

Here are four tips to get the most out of time on the balcony with your team.

1. Recognise time on the balcony as ‘real work’

We’ve just touched on this, but it’s worth repeating. Reflection on the team *is* real and valuable work. Team researcher Michael West has linked a team’s ability to reflect on both task (what the team is working on) and social (how the team is interacting with each other) dimensions with team effectiveness.

In other words, effective teams invest in this practice.

2. Build rhythms that work for your team

Having a schedule for reflecting on your team’s performance and way of working will significantly increase the chance of these practices forming. For each team, the cadence may vary – from daily to weekly or fortnightly. As a general principle, more frequency and less volume (shorter meetings) tends to work as a starting point. Leaders can (and should) adjust the rhythm as their team’s needs evolve.

3. Reduce friction

This is partly done by having a rhythm built into your team’s regular schedule. It is also done by using simple and easy-to-understand questions that are useful to your team to guide the process. The best questions are often simple ones (and the worst are

often complex). Having a consistent and short set of questions will help team members get more value out of the reflective activities.

4. Make this a team activity, not just leader-led

If the reflection is seen as a box-ticking activity by team members, it will be of little benefit. Invest in creating an environment where all team members are able to contribute and raise their concerns and observations. This could be through rotating the responsibility for running the session, or using asynchronous methods.

Each of these tips complements the others and can work together to help teams get “on the balcony”. Integrating these practices will help leaders in law firms to become better at responding to rapid changes with a greater sense of perspective than a reactive response from ‘the dance floor’.

*Keegan Luiters is an independent consultant who works with leaders, teams and organisations to lift their performance. His book, **Team Up**, explores how and why to take a deliberate approach to team performance. Visit www.keeganluiters.com for more information, or connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).*

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