

# LAWYERS UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: HOW DOES YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM WORK (TOGETHER)?

Rebecca Turner and Mark Schreiber

**L**eaders at law firms of all sizes face the daunting task of practicing law and running businesses. Like most professionals, they are well trained only with respect to their own discipline. Their skills and knowledge as to business management and leadership vary greatly. At the same time, the challenges faced by law firm leaders have never been greater as the profession has evolved over the years in response to competition and client demands.

No longer is anyone immune to the effects of these changes—even those firms where members think they share traditional concepts of the practice as a profession rather than primarily as a business enterprise. They hope they can rely on their genuine collegiality to carry them through the up and down economic periods.

In good times, economic prosperity usually allows law firm members to defer resolution of unresolved interpersonal conflicts and postpone meaningful strategic deci-

sion making. However, in times of economic stress, there may not be enough financial reward available to counterbalance the demoralizing weight of long-unresolved conflicts, especially as an ever-growing legion of legal recruiters sings the siren songs of opportunity.

Accordingly, it behooves lawyers, particularly those charged with the responsibility for running the businesses of their firms, to examine the strengths and vulnerabilities in their teams and to manage the relationships of those participating in their enterprises as best they can, using the best tools now available. The personal qualities of the people involved and their working relationships with one another will ultimately determine whether strategic plans and new initiatives are actually ever implemented.

In this regard, firms should not overlook the potential benefits of tools from the field of organizational psychology. Often, attorneys are not surprised by the recommendations of their business consultants. They sometimes

observe that the recommendations received at great cost were in fact what they already knew they should be doing. Reducing the reluctance or resistance against doing the right thing may be less a matter of business analysis (although sometimes the affirmation of an outsider telling you so may help move matters along) than of psychoanalysis.

The work of Robert F. Bales, the late Harvard professor, has left us with one of the most valuable tools available for examining group dynamics. His SYstem for the Multiple Level Observation of Groups, or SYMLOG, represents the culmination of more than forty years of research into how groups develop, have conflict, and produce results. The impact of such assessment tools is their ability to provide a reasonably accurate analysis of an organization in a relatively short time, allowing work to begin more quickly on improving the group's effectiveness.

A SYMLOG analysis is based on responses of group members to a surprisingly brief multiple-choice questionnaire, which explores the extent to which each member of the team exhibits behaviors that reflect particular values known to have a tremendous effect on teamwork: (1) task orientation (which refers to the extent to which each member is accepting of the group's strategy or direction); (2) friendliness; and (3) dominance.

The data from the group members are evaluated and each group member's values are presented graphically. Two examples are shown on this page. In each graph, one axis represents the task orientation of the individual, and the other axis shows a quantification of the individual's friendly behavior. The perceived dominance of each individual in

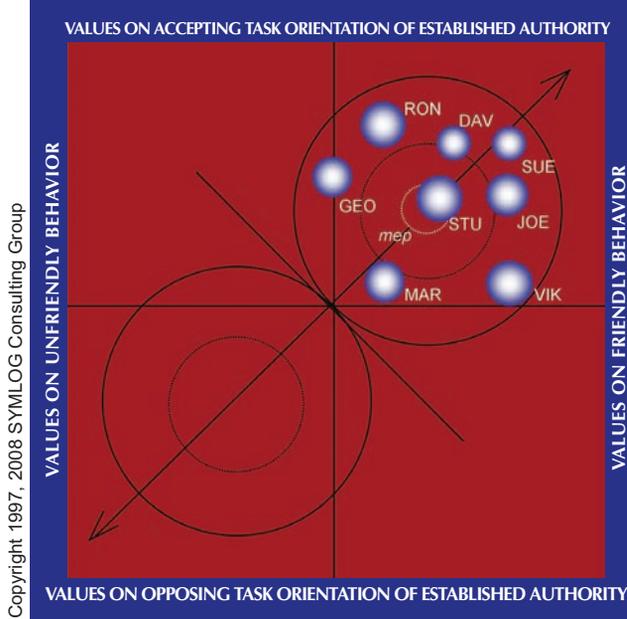


Figure 1. A unified team

the group is reflected in the size of each circle plotted on the graph.

In a unified team (illustrated in Figure 1), SYMLOG shows all of the members close together in the quadrant that research has identified as fostering optimal leadership values and behaviors for greater satisfaction, less stress, and greater productivity (mep = most effective profile).

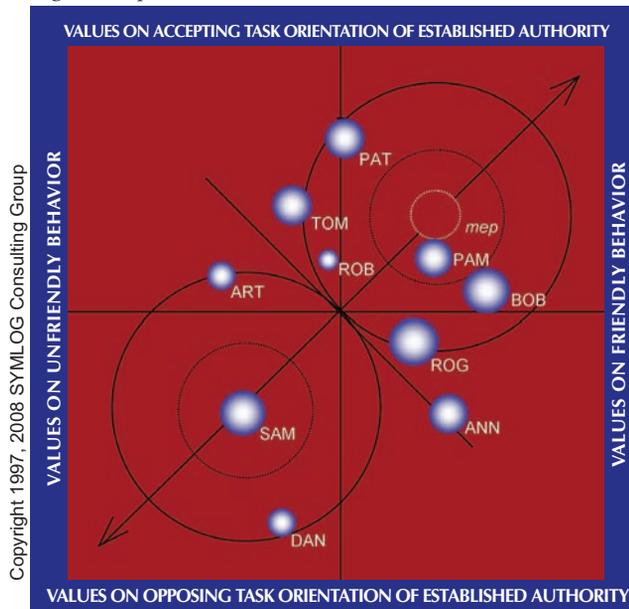
In such a group, there is a balance of task-oriented and friendly behavior as well as moderate levels of dominance among its members. Each of the team members occupies a different place with respect to how they are perceived by others; but, this is an example of SYMLOG's results for a team that works together well.

By contrast, the team in Figure 2 is fractured. When team members talk with one another, if they do at all, they are likely to be in conflict. As an alternative to conflict, the members of this group may work independently and avoid supporting one another's efforts as there may be no perceived benefit of collaboration. Sometimes, groups in this situation seek to improve their effectiveness by encouraging their leaders to be even more forward (task oriented) or directive, even if they have no intention of following any such direction as individuals.

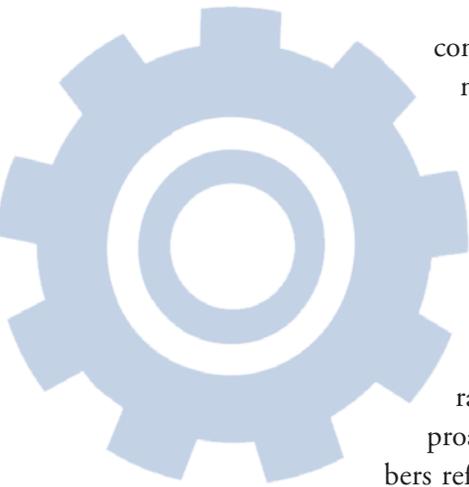
When this occurs, the problem remains that the team is not collaborating toward goals but is impaired by conflict or potential conflict.

How do you help such teams get past being stuck? Polarized teams often maintain the status quo out of an inability to progress in any direction, a situation neither satisfying nor fruitful for long-term sustainability in challenging

Figure 2. A polarized team



Copyright 1997, 2008 SYMLOG Consulting Group



competitive business environments. Consultants trained in organizational psychology, efficiently clued in to the dynamics of the group and its members through assessment tools like SYMLOG, would typically use a collaborative rather than a prescriptive approach to help the team members reflect upon how they might work differently with one another in

order to achieve more. This usually requires some new thinking and openness to possible change on everyone's part, rather than just a quick fix to be implemented with respect to just one or two people. Often, the problems in such groups can be identified and become redefined with the help of an outsider, similar to the dynamic that sometimes occurs in mediation. Once there is agreement on restating the challenges that face the group, then work can begin on finding ways to address them.

SYMLOG is only one tool available to identify the factors underlying difficult work relationships. Another method attracting growing interest is a technique called 5 Dynamics, which is a strengths-based approach assessing individuals' work preferences. For example, are you (1) the one who explores all the options (the "big picture" person); (2) the one who inspires people and rallies them around the cause; (3) the one with the analytical mind that finds all the holes in arguments and tests the logic; or (4) the one with the driving force to get results, to be relentless until it happens? A well-balanced team needs all of these! The 5 Dynamics process examines the team, predicting with uncanny accuracy the benefits and the challenges of collaborative and creative work among its members. This tool is often a good first step in cases where team members are willing to open up new ways of thinking about the potential of working together better. It takes only a few minutes for a participant to complete and is available after taking a one-day certification training.

Most important of all, these research-based, online assessment tools in the hands of those trained to use them can help firms construct a productive dialogue and end gridlock. Rather than being told what to do by outside consultants, the goal here is learning—seeing your team in realistic terms, working together to identify and solve problems, and finally, managing conflict productively.



Mark Schreiber and Rebecca Turner

*Rebecca Turner, Ph.D., is an organizational consultant, executive coach, and professor of organizational psychology at Marshall Goldsmith School of Management in San Francisco. She can be reached at [rturner@alliant.edu](mailto:rturner@alliant.edu). Mark Schreiber is managing partner of Cooper, White & Cooper LLP and received his undergraduate training in organizational behavior. He can be reached at [mschreiber@cwclaw.com](mailto:mschreiber@cwclaw.com).*

## RESOURCES

- ◆ For more information on SYMLOG, visit <http://www.symlog.com>.
- ◆ For more information about 5 Dynamics, visit <http://5dynamics.com>.