

EFFECTIVE PARTNER RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

Why Can't We Get Along?

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WHY CAN'T WE GET ALONG?

INTRODUCTION

“Isn’t it a shame that we have to pay a consultant to travel half-way across the country to get us to convene a formal meeting with each other, something so simple, yet something we have been unable to do ourselves.”

The managing partner of a firm spoke these words on the morning of an all day retreat that I facilitated for his firm. It was the first time the strife-torn partners of this firm had convened a formal meeting with each other – of any kind – in years.

Throughout my consulting career, roughly 60% of the firms I have consulted with either had either major partner conflicts or a pronounced lack of effective partner communication.

One of the most difficult issues for CPA firm partners is the relationships and communication between partners and the resulting, inevitable conflicts. The 60% statistic above is clear evidence of this.

Unless the partners of a firm work reasonably well together, it is almost impossible for them to achieve results that are any different than a union of solos would accomplish practicing under one roof while sharing staff and overhead. When partners don’t work well together, the success of their firm is threatened:

- Management is weak because the partners don't trust each other.
- Partners point fingers at each other when important duties go unattended.
- Accountability is non-existent.
- The staff are demoralized by the mixed messages they get from partners who are not on the same page.
- Staff don't stay around long because of the obvious signs of partner strife. They certainly would never want to be partners with this group of disgruntled people.
- Clients are under-served because firm partners' expertise isn't shared.
- Prospects are lost when partners refuse to team sell.
- Innovation and visioning stop because partners are focused on work in the "here and now" and don't spend time innovating and developing a vision for their firm.

Until the partners of a firm learn how to get along and work well together, problems such as those listed above remain unresolved and can paralyze the organization. Indeed, there have been several occasions throughout my career in which I declined to work with a firm (on a project such as strategic planning) because I saw right away that the firm and its partner relations were so dysfunctional. I knew that my work and the fees they would pay me would be a waste of time and money.

Many of you are certainly familiar with Jim Collins' legendary book, *Good To Great*. It has always seemed to me that Collins had CPA firms at least partially in mind when he wrote the book. The following passage from this book reinforces the importance of partner relations and communications:

"Great firms don't *first* figure out where to drive the bus and then get people to take it there. Instead, they first get the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and *then* figure out where to drive it. People either stay on the bus for a long time or they get off in a hurry."

The sentiment here is that when a CPA firm has key people who are negative, argumentative, naysayers, pessimistic and refuse to compromise or be accountable, the organization can never move forward. The cancer needs to be removed before it spreads throughout the firm. Then, and only then, can you work together and move forward.

What causes these problems? Why can't partners get along? How can partners work well together? What do they need to do? What does it mean to be a "good" partner? When inevitable conflicts arise (even healthy firms have conflicts), how can they be resolved?

The remainder of this monograph answers these questions.