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## Five Signs of “One Firm Thinking”

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By David Cruickshank



Managing partners sometimes complain to me about the lack of collaboration and teamwork in their firms. Then they shrug and declare, “It’s the nature of lawyers to be individualists.” The implication is that nothing can be done about it. I contend that a good leader can move a firm toward “one firm thinking” despite those strong individual egos and actions.

If we could send a legal anthropologist into one of those rare tribes where one-firm thinking exists, what would we discover? I’ve observed five signs to discover if this collaborative set of attitudes and behaviors has become embedded.

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One-firm thinking is exhibited when all the lawyers speak about “*our* clients” and matters that “*we* are advancing for our client.” Even the great rainmaking coup by an individual becomes “*our* new client.” The hope is that the client will outlast the lawyer who made the initial sale. Leaders reinforce this by constantly asking partners to use “our clients.” The attitude shift is “from me to we.” [\[1\]](#)

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Every firm has its internal critics – about compensation, governance, expenses, inefficiencies, etc. Constructive criticism should be encouraged and changes should respond to those criticisms. One-firm thinking requires partners to keep their criticisms in-house and not share them more broadly. Asking associates to do the same in the era of Above the Law is a tall order. If partners model this practice and demonstrate how reputational loss affects everyone, some associates may be persuaded. More importantly, firms that conduct satisfaction surveys, upward reviews and town hall meetings will be able to “hear” the critiques early and respond, instead of reacting to the latest anonymous post on social media.

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Suppose you work at Our Firm LLP. From your early days, did Our Firm tell you about its values and its claims to excellence and uniqueness? Many firms do this. But fewer convert their values and procedures into a brand identity. In a firm with one-firm thinking, the brand is not just the name and the marketing. There is also an “Our Firm Way” of doing things. How do we write and present litigation research? How do we manage matters within a budget? What are our standards for client service? Firms that do this and get contented clients to talk about their brand positively – because of unique standards or processes – are demonstrating one-firm thinking.

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Cross-selling is really the last act of a longer play. Partners who practice one-firm thinking are constantly making introductions across practices. They ask clients about their legal challenges outside a few matters. They put together teams for proposal generation. In any business-development approach, they bring the “we” attitude, and cross-selling follows.

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Even in firms that reward origination, we see that collaborative business and industry activity is recognized in the compensation system. The more sophisticated systems may use a balanced scorecard approach, and articulate specific examples of collaboration. Finally, the firm tries to measure both the efforts and the results of collaboration (example: “How many RFPs did we get invited to over last year?”). Of course, the purest example of one-firm thinking would be a lockstep system without bonuses or productivity minimums. It is just understood that all partners work for the firm’s benefit over the individual. These systems are nearly extinct; so one-firm thinking in compensation is represented by multi-factor systems, in which collaboration has an important place.

The overall challenge for a leader who seeks one-firm thinking is a paradoxical one. The leader has to convince every partner that his or her individual interests are best served by one-firm thinking, and some of the behaviors outlined here.

*David Cruickshank is a principal with Edge. His recent work on talent development and law firm strategy has led to the implementation of “one firm thinking” strategies in client firms.*

[1] This is also the name of a great Canadian children’s social enterprise. See [www.metowe.com](http://www.metowe.com).