

If you can't tame your gorilla, take a clean shot

By Tony Williams
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The legal gorilla usually claims to have a good practice, is one of the highest billers in the firm and likes everyone to know it, and treat him with respect and deference. He is the typical alpha male (and they are almost invariably male).

Additional fee income is hard to find these days so it may be argued that it is business suicide to do anything to upset such a sensitive and endangered species. Indeed, surely everything should be done to encourage them to stay? To a large extent this view continues, with the incumbent given a steady supply of bananas to keep them contented. The bananas may come in the form of increased remuneration, bonuses, a board position or a leading role in a practice group

Ego-getter

However, the key difference between a gorilla and other high performers is that they are primarily selfish and egotistical. They tend to keep their client relationships to themselves and rarely involve other partners or offices with the client.

They tend not to encourage or recruit the most able talent into their team as they wish to remain unchallenged. Indeed, perversely, such individuals are often surprisingly personally insecure. Accordingly, the best associates and younger partners that work with them face a stark choice of paying homage or moving out of the practice group or, more often, the firm. They then face the wrath of the gorilla for being disloyal "after all he's done" to advance their careers.

In these circumstances the leadership of a firm faces a dilemma. At one level they do not want clone partners and they do want to instil a high-performance culture. The gorilla is usually a furiously hard worker. But, conversely, they wish to develop, embed and protect the firm's culture. Accordingly, terms such as effective teamwork, mutual respect, client teams, meritocracy and the development of associates are liberally sprinkled across the firm's 'values statement'.

The gorilla will be a high-biller, but by not involving others in the client relationship may be unprofitable, and by failing to institutionalise and broaden the client relationship is rarely maximising the work the firm could do for the client. By sheer force of personality he may get his protégés promoted to partner, provided they play by his rules.

Others in the firm see this behaviour being tolerated and rewarded and therefore assume that, notwithstanding the values statement, behaving like a gorilla or being a member of their troop is the way to survive and thrive.

Clearly, the leadership can take no action, accept that their values statement is hypocritical junk and keep the gorilla amused so as to safeguard the fee income he produces. The containment strategy may at times be necessary, but it has implications for the culture and development of the firm.

Leaders may confront the gorilla and encourage him to change his ways. Surprisingly, the gorilla in question is often unaware of the negative impact he may be having on those around him. In some cases this may work, especially where the leader is someone he respects. But in many instances the impact is at best temporary.

Then the leader faces a real challenge – push the gorilla out and the other partners get spooked at the loss of a heavy hitter and the related fee income (especially when relatively few firms are well-endowed with culturally aligned major client-winning partners) or encourage the gorilla to go, usually by taking away a few -bananas. But the departure is usually noisy, with the firm the gorilla moves to claiming a major coup and the headhunters circling for more targets.

Beware wounded gorillas

Leaders need to carefully prepare the ground before pushing the gorilla out if they are to retain the support of partners. The exit needs to be as quick and clinical as possible. A single shot. A wounded gorilla can be dangerous.

Fortunately, the outcome is usually positive. It may be found that the client was not as in love with the gorilla as was thought. And those in the gorilla's team, freed from his oppressive behaviour, can flourish.

One senior partner who agonised for ages over a gorilla hunt described the result as "like taking a cork out of a champagne bottle". The energy it produced, and the recognition that the firm lived its values, more than made up for the loss of the gorilla.

So choose your target carefully and try to tame the gorilla, but if that fails position yourself carefully, especially with your board and partners, get ready, aim and fire.