

# One Firm and Several Cultures

*How a large professional services group compared the culture it described with the culture people experienced*

---

## SECTOR

Professional services

## PARTICIPANTS

One hundred and eight partners, directors and senior managers

## CARDS USED

The Architect, The Rebel, The Scapegoat, The Patron and The Phantom

## ORGANISATION

Regional advisory firm with six offices

## BUSINESS PRIORITY

Strengthen collaboration across offices and service lines

## OUTCOME

The group identified five recurring culture patterns and converted them into office and firm-wide commitments

---

## 01 Business context

The firm described its culture as entrepreneurial, collaborative and close to clients. Annual engagement feedback showed that employees experienced those qualities differently across offices.

Some teams valued the freedom to act. Others described repeated negotiation over resources, uneven access to senior leaders and slow cooperation across service lines. Client work often depended on personal relationships between partners rather than a consistent firm-wide process.

The annual leadership gathering brought together 108 partners, directors and senior managers from six offices. The agenda included strategy, growth priorities and a session on the culture required to deliver them.

Mirror Deck was used to gather a large group's experience without reducing the discussion to a few speakers at the front.

## 02 How Mirror Deck was used

Participants sat at tables of six, with functions and offices deliberately mixed. Each table received a set of cards and two questions:

— Which cards describe how work gets done in the firm today?

— Which roles would need to change for people to work as one firm?

Participants selected cards silently before comparing choices. Each table agreed on two current roles and one role whose influence needed to reduce, grow or move.

The table maps were posted around the meeting space. During a gallery review, participants marked patterns they recognised and added examples from their own offices.

### 03 Patterns across the firm

---

Five cards appeared repeatedly.

*The Architect*

*The Rebel*

*The Scapegoat*

*The Patron*

*The Phantom*

The Architect represented the firm's strong central processes. Participants valued the consistency those processes created in risk, quality and brand. Regional offices also described systems designed around the largest office, requiring local teams to adapt their work to structures they had little part in shaping.

The Rebel appeared in offices that protected local speed and client responsiveness. Partners often worked around central processes to solve a client problem. These exceptions supported growth and made firm-wide learning harder because successful practices stayed local.

The Scapegoat was frequently placed beside risk and operations. Commercial teams relied on these functions to protect the firm and blamed them when a proposal slowed. Risk leaders responded by adding detail and documentation, which reinforced the view that they obstructed progress.

The Patron represented access to influential partners. Sponsorship created opportunities, helped people cross office boundaries and brought expertise into client work. Uneven access meant that collaboration often followed personal networks rather than the needs of the assignment.

The Phantom represented the absent voice of colleagues below senior-manager level. Leaders spoke often about the employee experience, while most decisions about workload, staffing and development were made without those employees present.

### 04 From cards to working practices

---

The large-group map showed that the firm had several versions of the same culture. Each office valued entrepreneurship and collaboration. The roles through which those values operated were different.

The facilitator asked tables to choose one pattern they could influence directly. They then defined the behaviour that currently sustained it and a replacement practice that could be observed.

One office focused on The Patron and agreed to publish opportunities for major proposals rather than filling teams through existing partner networks. Another focused on The Rebel and created a monthly review of successful local workarounds so useful changes could enter the formal process.

The risk leadership table used The Scapegoat to redesign early involvement in proposals. Risk advisers would join at the point of shaping the approach, giving commercial teams earlier guidance and reducing late-stage review.

## 05 Firm-wide commitments

---

The executive committee selected three commitments from the table work.

Cross-office assignments would use a visible staffing process for senior roles. Each central function would establish a practitioner group from all six offices to review process changes. Quarterly culture reviews would include employees from manager and associate levels.

Every office leader also chose one local pattern and named the action, owner and review date before the gathering ended.

## 06 What the session achieved

---

The session produced a culture discussion grounded in how work was allocated, approved and supported. Participants could compare offices through shared roles while preserving the differences in local experience.

Mirror Deck allowed a group of 108 people to contribute before senior voices shaped the discussion. The repeated cards provided a clear summary for the executive committee, and the examples attached to them kept the analysis practical.

The group left with a more useful culture question:

---

*“Which roles make collaboration possible here, and which roles keep it dependent on personal influence?”*