



LAWYERS AS LEADERS

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In my last article, *Leaders, Managers & Bullies*, I presented the notion that to be successful, law firms need the skills and abilities of all three personality types at the management helm. Because it is rare that one individual can capably fill all of these roles, a team-oriented management approach is warranted at most firms today. In this article, I elaborate further on those qualities which are essential in good leaders.

First, what is the role of the leader in the law firm? In my last article, I defined leaders as visionaries who see the firm not as it is, but how it might be. They somehow see a path being forged through an uncertain future laden with obstacles and marketplace hostility. The fact that they take a long-term view of the firm assists in establishing direction for others to follow, and also assists the firm in developing a long-term strategic plan.

True leaders inspire. They consistently demonstrate honesty and integrity, thereby providing a strong role model for others to emulate. They are good at focusing on what is important to those they lead, thereby earning loyalty and arousing motivation.

Leaders create collective “buy-in” because they have either sufficient charisma to invoke a desire in others to follow the same path, or they have the innate sensitivity to recognize, draw upon and respond to the emotional and intellectual needs of others. They promote alignment and progress in the organization as they lead intelligent people to pull their oars in rhythm and move in the desired direction.

Not all leaders are highly charismatic. In fact there are many individuals who are potentially capable leaders, even though they would reject that categorization, because they do not have the “charisma” usually associated with this role. However, it is the ability to understand what motivates others— what their needs and desires are— which is the most important element of leadership. In other words, leaders are more focused on what’s important to those they lead, than on their own priorities.

Effective leaders have the ability to remain calm during chaotic times. They do not overreact. As I write this I am reminded of an incident which occurred at one law firm I managed. One of the “name partners” became concerned about an industry trend which negatively impacted his practice area. One evening he abruptly burst into my office and exclaimed, “We’re heading down a precipice in a car with no brakes!” This was the best he could manage in his panicked state to express his concern. I must admit that his over-the-top reaction left me somewhat unnerved. His expressions of similar concern elsewhere in the firm created a decline in morale and were clearly demotivating to others. A true leader would have calmly requested an economic analysis of the marketplace impact, and recommendations on remediating strategies.

Leaders think things through and provide clear, concise directions. They take responsibility for their actions. They protect those who carry out their orders when things do not turn out well, rather than distance themselves from the heat. They deflect praise to others, and absorb criticism. They exhibit genuine humility.

Effective leaders must be excellent communicators. That does not necessarily mean that they are skilled in masterful oratory. There are many ways to effectively communicate. Effective leaders actively solicit new ideas and differing viewpoints, and are open minded to what they hear. It means that they help ensure everyone is heard, and that good ideas receive fair consideration. They remain focused on reaching goals, but don’t get hung up on the notion that the process must be done “their way” only. They make sure that everyone clearly knows what is expected of them, and that they are given the professional development and tools necessary to achieve the goals. What motivates leaders? True leaders measure part of their own success by their ability to help others succeed.

Lawyers are highly intelligent and self-motivated, but also suspicious and risk-averse. Their suspicious nature makes lawyers highly resistant to change, and slow to develop trust in others. Lawyers must view a leader to be scrupulously honest, fair in dealing with people and situations, and sensitive to people’s needs. So to be effective, smart leaders work to keep lawyers highly self-motivated by ensuring they are achieving their professional and personal development goals. In other words, you can’t force change on lawyers and expect a successful outcome. Smart leaders figure out how to enable lawyers to see that embracing change is in their best interest.

When I first started out working for law firms, money and power were the primary motivators. Today’s issues are less about money and more about work environment, quality of life, professional development, and the respect of ones peers



and the community. Today's successful leaders recognize times and the workforce have changed, and strive to provide the environment necessary to keep people happy and motivated. By doing so, individuals will be successful, and so, in turn, will the firm be successful.

Not everyone is capable of being a true leader in every sense. Nonetheless, firms should work to develop leadership traits in their lawyers. Skill sets which include calm, clarity, empathy, fairness, a desire to help others succeed, and unwavering integrity are highly valuable in any organization, and particularly to law firms. By developing a leadership mentality, the quality of life at a law firm will improve, as will its success. Professional coaching is available to assist in developing leadership skills, and there are publications and workshops as well.

If your firm has a "natural" leader you will know it. You will have recognized that individual as you read this article. If not, seek to find the right person(s) at your firm, and provide the necessary encouragement and tools to help him or her to develop into a capable leader. Perhaps the right person is you. Perhaps it is you with the help of some coaching assistance or study. If you've got some or many of the traits described in this article, seek assistance to develop your skill set further. You will assist your firm to achieve success, and more importantly, you will find your personal and professional life far more rewarding.

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