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What Lawyers and Law Firm Leaders Can Learn from Derek Jeter

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July, 2011**

On a glorious Spring day in May, 1996, I took my son, Bradley, then 14, to a local batting cage on the South Shore of Long Island for a little practice before his regular Little League game. Bradley was and is a gifted natural athlete, with myriad natural talents: great hand-eye coordination, agility, the desire and ability to practice endlessly until he achieves perfection in any sport and a healthy desire to be competitive.

When we arrived at the local batting cage on Rockaway Turnpike in Lawrence, New York, we were presently surprised to

find that the proprietors had arranged for then Yankee rookie Derek Jeter to make a guest appearance, signing autographs, making a presentation about swinging the bat and actually taking time to provide coaching to the kids in attendance. Jeter, who had a lifelong obsession about becoming the shortstop for the New York Yankees, was rather remarkable. He was self effacing and his quiet charisma and gentle way was actually exhilarating.

Jeter gave a very short talk about baseball and the basics of hitting the ball and

then gave a demonstration to the group of 40 youngsters and their dads. He then encouraged the kids to pick up a bat, take a cage and circulated among the cages giving each of the kids pointers. When he got to Bradley's cage, he watched for a bit and gave Bradley a couple of pointers regarding his stance and his grip on the bat and said "Brad, you're going to do really well. You keep your eye on the ball, take a good careful swing, connect well with the ball and focus on the good clean hits. Most kids your age look to smash the ball out of the park, but you understand that you need solid singles and doubles to win. When ball players look to just smash at the rafters, they miss the fundamentals and strike out more often than getting on base."



So, today, when we New Yorkers bask in the reflected glory of [Jeter's 3,000th base hit](#), becoming the 28th major league baseball player to do so, I also have given some thought to what we lawyers and law firm leaders can learn from Jeter. We build on the [lessons we previously learned about leadership from Google](#) and its style of corporate leadership and management.

First, of course, there is Jeter's basic advice to Bradley: focus on the ball and the fact that you need lots of singles and doubles to win. Certainly, it's great to get a grand slam, but if that is where your singular focus is, you will strike out more often than

getting on base. Simply put, a lawyer builds a solid practice by focusing on fundamentals and building his or her practice one hit at a time. If you try to build your practice by only aiming for the rafters – looking only for the billion dollar bet the company cases – you will strike out more often than you will get on base. Jeter's current career batting average of .313 is surpassed by only two other members of the 3,000 base hit club, Ty Cobb and Pete Rose.



When Woody Allen was asked by the *New Yorker* years ago to identify the one critical component for success, Allen's succinct response was "showing up." Jeter was more expansive on the subject during the post game interview. You not only need to show up, you need to take pride in your work and always stay focused: "Physically, you have a responsibility that can be difficult, and mentally as well, you have to be in every pitch, every game," Jeter said. "So there's probably a reason why there's not too many guys that have played the position that have had that amount of hits. I take pride in it. This is my job. This is the only thing I've done."

Jeter's focus on "showing up" was also an integral part of his fierce loyalty to the team. In this era of athlete and lawyer free agency, Jeter's fidelity was to the

team he desired to join from his youth. Said the *New York Times* “Jeter never wanted a day off, he said, for fear that George Steinbrenner, the impatient principal owner, would replace him.”

There is much to learn from Jeter’s role as team captain. A crucial component of leadership, Yankee manager Joe Torre said in describing Jeter, is that those being led cannot resent the leader. On a team of veterans, the players tacitly accept Jeter’s status. He is a link to the title teams of the late 1990s, he plays the game correctly and he does not betray their confidence. Jeter jogs on to the field every inning leading his team with quiet self confidence. On off days during spring training, he is on the field jogging, working out and otherwise practicing.



Jeter leads by example. He leads the lineup, taking the first risk in confronting the opposition. He shows quiet doggedness and determination. Unlike other icons, he eschews self aggrandizement. As *The New York Times* rhapsodized in its editorial of July 11, 2011: “Here’s the thing about Derek Jeter: He’s great and we love him, with an admiration that has little to do with statistical milestones and big round numbers.”

Those basic precepts are the fundamentals for law firm leaders. Lead by example. Earn the respect of the superstars

in your team through a combination of dedication and respect for the contributions made by your colleagues. A successful law firm leader recognizes that he is not creating a personal cult. The successful law firm leader recognizes that he is merely a steward of the firm and is indelibly linked to its legacy, while charged with the responsibility to have that legacy enhance the team under his or her watch, allowing subsequent generations of law firm leaders build further on that enhanced legacy. Earn, respect and preserve the confidence of your colleagues.

Perhaps the greatest kudos that could be bestowed on a respected law firm leader is to have his or her partners say, “He (or she) is great and we love him (or her). Our respect for him (or her) has little to do with statistical milestones and big round numbers.”



A fitting coda to the Jeter 3,000th hit milestone is the story of Christain Lopez, the 23 year old fan from New Jersey who actually caught the ball hit by Jeter, [a catch described by some as winning a million dollar lottery ticket](#). Lopez, a Verizon repairman, could have easily earned hundreds of thousands of dollars for that ball – presumably a tad more than he is currently earning. Instead, he simply returned the ball to Jeter, because, Lopez said he deserved that reward. The Yankees did voluntarily bestow upon Lopez a small trove of game seats. The parable is a mighty lesson for

law firms: The serendipitous finder of the valuable treasure should not be inordinately rewarded by his chance being where the ball landed. Jeter, who had ground away for years to reach the milestone was entitled to the reward. The point, of course, is that in a team sport, whether it be a law firm or a ball team, [all members of the team – finders, minders and grinders need to be rewarded and recognized.](#)

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