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## Creating Better Law Firm Leaders: What Law Firms Can Learn from Google

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I recently attended a conference of managing partners in which one of the topics under discussion was “How many hats does a managing partner need to wear?” The discussion was animated and the clear consensus was that an MP needs to wear them all: manager, strategic thinker, leader, psychologist, economist, parental figure, marketer, promoter, consensus builder, team builder, peace maker, visionary, piñata, the Harry Truman “buck stops here” hat, huckster, Indian chief, CEO, COO, CMO CIO, and on and on.

As I relaxed in my easy chair on Saturday catching up on my reading, a piece in the *New York Times* about work performed within Google (clearly one of the greatest companies on the planet) to create better managers. The piece, entitled “[The Quest to Build a Better Boss](#),” describes Google’s detailed analyses and data mining to identify the definitive qualities of

effective managers. Remarkably, Google's list is short and sweet. It identified "Eight Habits of Highly Effective Google Manager" and "Three Pitfalls of Managers."

Among the reasons Google's simple principles struck me is that they appeared as Bob Ruyback was being pilloried for his failed stewardship at Howrey by, among others, [Professor Steve Harper](#) and minions of anonymous Howrey staffers and lawyers on an a blog entitled "[It's Howrey Doody Time](#)." At the time of this writing, that Howrey blog, which has been in existence for only a couple of months, seems to have received an astounding 262,000 hits. And at the same time, Mr. Ruyack is also being criticized by his former partners (whom he said "abandoned him") for [putting them in serious long term financial jeopardy](#).

Mr. Ruyack's contentions, among other things was that partners jumped ship because they "had little tolerance for change" and the new free agency mindset of Big Law partners induced them to leave when there was a dip in revenues. Yes, lawyers do resist change, as I [previously reported](#). But that innate resistance to change must be overcome by leadership and sound management skills.

And in every study ever done on why people seek alternative employment, compensation factors rank at the bottom of the list. Always at the top of the list for reasons for voluntarily leaving a job is a lack of job satisfaction. I [also previously wrote](#) about how important it is for law firm leadership to concern itself with associate job satisfaction, even in an era when the supply of lawyers so far exceeds demand. Certainly, the same principles of maintaining adequate job satisfaction is all the more critical at the partner level. Maintaining job satisfaction is a critical function of management.

My own personal view, based on long years of observation, is that successful law firm leadership is predicated on fairly few building a team, developing consensus, avoiding hubris, and keeping lines of communication open and honest, giving deference and weight to all of a law firm's stakeholders. Here, then is Google's Rules, as reported by *The Times*.

## Google's Rules

To engineer better managers, Google pored over performance reviews, feedback surveys and award nominations, correlating words and phrases as only a data-driven company like it can do. Here is an edited list of the directives it produced — in order of importance — as well as a few management pitfalls it found.

### Eight Good Behaviors

#### 1. Be a good coach

- Provide specific, constructive feedback, balancing the negative and the positive.
- Have regular one-on-ones, presenting solutions to problems tailored to your employees' specific strengths.

#### 2. Empower your team and don't micromanage

- Balance giving freedom to your employees, while still being available for advice. Make "stretch" assignments to help the team tackle big problems.

#### 3. Express interest in team members' success and personal well-being

- Get to know your employees as people, with lives outside of work.
- Make new members of your team feel welcome and help ease their transition.

#### 4. Don't be a sissy: Be productive and results-oriented

- Focus on what employees want the team to achieve and how they can help achieve it.
- Help the team prioritize work and use seniority to remove roadblocks.

#### 5. Be a good communicator and listen to your team

- Communication is two-way: you both listen and share information.
- Hold all-hands meetings and be straightforward about the messages and goals of the team. Help the team connect the dots.
- Encourage open dialogue and listen to the issues and concerns of your employees.

#### 6. Help your employees with career development

#### 7. Have a clear vision and strategy for the team

- Even in the midst of turmoil, keep the team focused on goals and strategy.
- Involve the team in setting and evolving the team's vision and making progress toward it.

#### 8. Have key technical skills so you can help advise the team

- Roll up your sleeves and conduct work side by side with the team, when needed.
- Understand the specific challenges of the work.

### Three Pitfalls of Managers

#### 1. Have trouble making a transition to the team

- Sometimes, fantastic individual contributors are promoted to managers without the necessary skills to lead people.
- People hired from outside the organization don't always understand the unique aspects of managing at Google.

#### 2. Lack a consistent approach to performance management and career development

- Don't help employees understand how these work at Google and doesn't coach them on their options to develop and stretch.
- Not proactive, waits for the employee to come to them.

#### 3. Spend too little time managing and communicating

Source: Google

As I said, Google is a great company and we, as a profession, should build on these principles to create better law firm managers, practice group leaders, office leaders and lawyers heading up particular engagements.

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