

## Take Time To Be Inspiring

by Patrick J. McKenna

One need only look through the business news to realize that we have embarked upon trying times. In a slowing economy there's a tendency for you to gravitate toward acting more like an administrator or boss (watching the numbers like a hawk). Obviously this is necessary, but so is offering suggestions, being supportive, being a source of creative ideas, helping your people think through their roles and helping them make the best use of their time. Here are five illustrative questions for you to contemplate:

- **Do you show a genuine interest in what each of your lawyers wants to achieve with their careers?**

Think about each member of your legal department. Have any valued members left recently or announced that they are about to? Are some individuals, with a lot of potential, performing at levels far below where they should? If your answer to either of these questions is affirmative, then the chances are that you may have neglected to pay attention to something these individuals need to jump-start their careers. Paying close attention to what your professionals need in developing their careers is a critical part of any leader's role.

- **Do you show an interest in the things that mean the most to your people in their personal lives?**

All of the people in your department have personal lives that are very important to them. Consider: do you explore with each of your people what they are keenly passionate about in their lives? Do you ask questions that get them talking about their interests? And when they do start talking about personal issues, do you show anything more than a perfunctory interest?

You may think, I'm not sure that people who have a professional working relationship really need to talk to each other about this kind of stuff. What is unsettling to me is that the qualities it takes to develop and nurture a successful marriage are the exact same as required to develop and nurture a successful team. We may need to reflect upon whom we spend more time with during the average working week, our spouses or our office colleagues.

- **Are you there for your colleagues in their times of personal or professional crisis?**

Every so often all of us confront crises and make important transitions in our lives. A family member goes into the hospital or a child is having a particularly difficult time at school. These various personal issues can very naturally manifest themselves in professional behavior that suggests a sudden disinterest in the work or, at the other extreme, people who are burying their personal issues in workaholic traits.

Right now, as you read this, it is very likely that some member of your team is facing some significant crisis or transition. If you are even aware of it, what kind of support are you offering?

- **Do you informally “check-in” with each of your colleagues every so often?**

Then there is the situations when work commitments get over-powering, when our internal systems seem to make it harder to get anything done, or when a technology glitch makes us wish for simpler times. When these things happen, they don't have a devastating effect, but they do preoccupy us. One of the things that helps is having someone notice and say: “You look a little distracted. What's going on?”

If a leader takes a few minutes to listen, something special happens. We have a chance to “vent.” It rarely solves the problem, but we usually feel better. If you're the person doing it, it doesn't take a lot of time or effort. But for the individual who is the fortunate recipient, it's special. It seems like you've been given a battery recharge just when you needed it. Do you notice when team members are frustrated or distracted and take time to check in with them?

- **Do you offer to help when some member of your group clearly needs it?**

If your team is typical of ones I work with, you are very busy people and sometimes can find you're stretched to the limits of your capabilities. One of your team has just landed some monster project. Meanwhile, two serious glitches have just cropped up that were never anticipated. The question is, are you going to make some time available to help? And by help, I don't mean a few minutes being a sympathetic listener for your teammate. I mean as busy as you are, are you willing to take on some of your colleague's headaches to help him or her through a rough period?

If you truly seek to lead people I believe it all starts with determining whether you are prepared to spend time building and nurturing a relationship, above and beyond other urgencies. One of the things I observe is that those who lead groups don't always pay attention to the tremendously important role that relationships play in inspiring the success and satisfaction of those in their groups.

© 2008

Patrick J. McKenna ([www.patrickmckenna.com](http://www.patrickmckenna.com)) is a principal in Edge International and since 1983 has worked exclusively serving the legal profession. He is one of the foremost authorities on practice leadership and the author of numerous business bestsellers including *First Among Equals: How To Manage A Group Of Professionals* ((Free Press, 2002). In 2005, the book *Management Skills* (John Wiley/Jossey-Bass) named him among one of the leading thinkers in the field of business management.