

Good lawyers. Good leaders. Are they mutually exclusive?

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Now more than ever, law firms of all sizes need good leadership in order to thrive. The characteristics that traditionally make a good practicing lawyer, however, are quite different from the characteristics that make a good leader – or a good follower.

It's time to change that tradition.

According to research conducted by the Hildebrandt Institute, the current crop of lawyers strongly deviates (more than two standard deviations) from the rest of the population in six key areas.

“Lawyers as a group are highly skeptical, autonomous, introverted, resistant to new ideas, urgent and easily discouraged by set-backs,” said Mark Beese. “Leaders, on the other hand, tend to be trusting, team-oriented, social, open to new ideas, strategic and resilient. Business development or sales – in particular -- requires a high degree of resiliency.”

In addition, the traditional “matrix” structure of most law firms does not mesh well with leadership models from the business world, which offer a clear decision-making hierarchy. “It is very difficult for an outsider or a newcomer to know who at a law firm actually has the power at any given time on any given issue,” said Beese. “This can discourage would-be leaders.”

Beese further supported this claim with a quote from David Maister, a leading authority on the management of professional services firms and author of *The Trusted Advisor*:

After spending 25 years saying that all professions are similar and can learn from each other, I'm now ready to make a concession: Law firms are different. The ways of thinking and behaving that help lawyers excel in their profession may be the very things that limit what they can achieve as firms. Management challenges occur not in spite of lawyers' intelligence and training -- but because of them.

According to the Center for Creative Leadership in Colorado Springs, the strategic, operational and marketing challenges facing leaders – especially leaders at law firms – are more complex and urgent than ever before.

How can law firms overcome these personality and structural obstacles to develop the leadership they so desperately need in challenging times? How can they train skeptical, autonomous lawyers to participate on teams – not only as leaders, but also as followers of other lawyers or non-lawyer staff who bring essential business expertise to the table?

Beese addressed these questions at the monthly educational program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain), which took place Sept. 8 at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Denver.

Beese is president of Denver-based Leadership for Lawyers (www.leadershipforlawyers.com), which focuses on helping lawyers become better leaders and business developers. He is a board member of LMA International and former Chief Marketing Officer at Holland & Hart.

Firm culture must change

“Most lawyers find behavioral change to be difficult – even painful,” said Beese. “However, in our current environment, change is essential for survival. The engrained law firm culture discourages effective leadership -- and progress. The lawyer personality, the law firm structure and the weak precedent for leadership must all be addressed.”

What kind of culture encourages leadership? According to the CCL study, leaders are adaptable, build and mend relationships, build effective teams, facilitate change, coach, collaborate, drive innovation and leverage differences to achieve positive results. They are credible, decisive and influential.

“These behaviors differ greatly from many ‘traditional’ lawyer behaviors,” said Beese. “They will not change unless the firm culture changes to reward these new behaviors.”

A lot can be learned about a firm culture by its ‘conversations.’ “Conversations can take place at the water cooler, in meetings, in emails -- or in the actions (or inactions) taken by firm management,” said Beese. “Are most of your firm’s conversations regressive, negative, backward-looking and problem-based? If so, your culture needs to be revised before the next generation of leaders can evolve.”

“Leadership can thrive only when conversations – throughout the firm -- are constructive, positive, forward-looking and solution-based,” said Beese.

Individuals must self-identify as leaders

Certain job descriptions are commonly linked with leadership – C-level executives, elected officials and military officers, for example. “The truth is,” said Beese, “you don’t have to be the guy or gal ‘at the top’ to be a leader. Anyone can be an effective leader within a certain area of influence – and help create a culture of leadership.

“You might not be managing partner of your law firm, but you can exert leadership in more subtle ways,” said Beese “You can run a task force studying the use of social networks to market a new practice area. You can coach a brusque lawyer in gentler ways of working with staff. You can organize a bike team to participate in a race for the cure of an illness suffered by a fellow lawyer or staff person.

“The behaviors required to achieve each of these tasks will contribute to your personal identity – and your identity with the firm – as a leader,” said Beese. “Find your voice. Affirm shared values. Set an example by walking the talk. Build credibility for yourself and your team. Wake up each morning asking yourself, ‘How can I lead today?’ As Gandhi said, ‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’”

Leaders must rally others behind a shared vision

Leadership does not operate in a vacuum. Leaders are effective guides only when they act in service to a compelling, clear and challenging vision. “In his ‘I have a dream’ speech,” said Beese, “Martin Luther King, Jr., clearly outlined his vision for America. More than 45 years later, most Americans can still quote from that speech.”

The enlisting of others into an effort towards a common vision looks a lot like negotiation – something lawyers are familiar with. “Point out and build on an alignment of interests,” said Beese. “After years of experience, I firmly believe that this alignment is done best in one-on-one conversations rather than a group setting.”

Leaders must challenge the status quo

Because most lawyers are by nature resistant to new ideas, one of the key roles of a leader – innovation – can be troublesome for would-be leaders. “Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from experience,” said Beese.

“Look outside the legal profession for ideas and inspiration,” said Beese. “When I was at Holland & Hart, our internal marketing team came up with the innovative idea of partnering with Frontier Airlines to include short segments about our clients in flight programming. There was a lot of resistance at first, of course, but we ran a beta test of the segments and positive client response soon persuaded our lawyers to get on board.”

Leaders must implement actions to achieve the vision

Effective leaders know that they cannot do everything themselves – that they must engage and empower others and foster collaboration. They must measure results. Under good leaders, team members can answer in the affirmative the Twelve Questions of Engagement posed by Marcus Buckingham in his book, *First, Break All the Rules*:

1. Do I know what is expected of me at work?
2. Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?
3. At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
4. In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for good work?
5. Does my supervisor or someone at work seem to care about me as a person?
6. Is there someone at work who encourages my development?
7. At work, do my opinions seem to count?
8. Does the purpose of my company make me feel like my work is important?
9. Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?
10. Do I have a best friend at work?
11. In the last six months, have I talked with someone about my progress?
12. At work, have I had opportunities to learn and grow?

Leaders must build trust

The successful practice of law is based on good relationships between lawyers and their clients. The same holds true within a firm. The successful operation of a law firm is based on trusting relationships between leaders and group members. “You cannot lead others unless you know them,” said Beese.

“Trust is built from credibility (being good at what you do), reliability (doing what you say you will do) and intimacy (knowing the other person),” said Beese. “It is weakened by self-interest. Trust is never complete; it must be constantly maintained. If you want others to trust you, you must model trust in others.”

Lawyers may not be natural leaders and the current law firm environment may not encourage and reward the natural development of leaders. With training and attention, however, these obstacles can be overcome to give law firms the leadership they need in order to succeed in an increasingly competitive business environment.