Four Necessary Leadership Skills for Lawyers

Leading a law firm has never been easy, but lawyer leaders today face a more complex set of challenges from both inside and outside their firms. Beyond the daily challenges of finding and serving clients, law firm leaders are struggling with three main issues.

First, they must lead a multigenerational workforce. For the first time we have four generations working side-by-side in law firms, ranging from the Traditionalists in their 70s to Baby Boomers in their 50s and including Gen Xers in their late 30s and the new Millennials, who bring with them a fresh set of values relating to work/life balance, use of technology and interpersonal skills.

Second, lawyer leaders must lead their organizations in a complex and dynamic marketplace. The legal landscape is changing at a rapid pace. Clients are demanding greater service at lower rates. New competitors, such a legal process outsourcing and virtual firms, are creating new strategic threats. Technology is opening the doors for significant efficiencies.

Finally, lawyer leaders must direct operations across boundaries. Many firms operate from multiple offices, some across town and others across oceans. Managing people and projects from different locations, continents, cultures, time zones and languages can be challenging.
To overcome these difficulties successful leaders must master four critical leadership skills. They need to pay attention, develop networks, expand their influence and ignite change.

PAYING ATTENTION
Sometimes we get caught up in the tyranny of the urgent, making it difficult to pay attention to what's going on around us. Effective leaders find ways to listen to the murmurings and buzz around the firm. Military leaders call it "situational awareness."

What issues are people talking about? What are the emotions behind the conversations? What are people grateful for? What are they worried or angry about? Who is gaining influence and power? Who is losing influence? Why?

You will not find a smartphone app for situational awareness. It takes time, skill and effective listening to gain an accurate picture of what is happening. Leaders need to budget time for connecting with people, either in-person over a meal or electronically through email, phone or Skype. They develop a diagnostic set of open-ended questions that reveal opportunities or red flag issues, such as:

- What are some of the challenges your group is facing?
- How do you see your market changing? Your competition?
- What is working well in your group? Not so well?
- Where are the opportunities for growth that we should be thinking about?
- Who are some of the up-and-coming leaders in your area?

- What are people concerned about in your group?

Attentive leaders create mechanisms for effective listening that give them the information they need to lead. One managing partner I know regularly takes staff, associates and partners out to lunch in small groups of two or three. While many think he is "holding court" at the local sandwich shop, quite the opposite is true. He is asking questions, gleaning ideas and insights and quietly evaluating candidates for future leadership roles. Leaders listen first and then build a coalition to address critical issues.

DEVELOPING NETWORKS

A 2014 report by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), *A Leader's Network: How to Help Your Talent Invest in the Right Relationships at the Right Time*, claims that building a strong network is critical to a leader's success:

> *"CCL research has identified problems that cause leaders to derail, plateau prematurely in their career or be demoted or fired. The top derailment factors are: difficulty building and leading teams, troubled interpersonal relationships, failing to adapt to and leading change, missing business objectives, and having too narrow of a functional orientation. Leaders' networks are at the core of many of these problems.*
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> *Networks are at the heart of social capital—what leaders can do because of and through their relationships with others. Individuals improve their social capital when they can see and understand the connections between themselves and others within and beyond their workplace. With an accurate network perspective, leaders can strategically invest in their personal networks and build the social capital that is needed at each stage of their careers."*

The authors of the CCL report, Phil Willburn and Kristin Cullen, identify three qualities of a strong network. First, it must be *open*, that is, the network needs to be "structurally diverse." Not everyone in the network should know each other. An open network provides different streams of information, different perspectives and insights, and reveals new opportunities and potential threats.

The network also needs to be *diverse*. It must have connections that cross boundaries of all kinds: geographic, practice areas, staff/attorney, clients, contacts in business and industries, advisors and consultants. A diverse network increases trust, credibility and influence throughout the organization.

Finally, the network must have *depth*. It needs to contain quality relationships characterized by mutual trust, exchanges of information and access to resources and skills with people with different backgrounds.

Networked leaders are always asking themselves questions like:

- With whom do I need to initiate a new relationship?
- With whom do I need to strengthen our relationship?

- How can I expand the scope—i.e., the number of topics we discuss—and depth of conversation with my contacts?
- How can I share more of myself with others to build trust and intimacy?
- What can I do to give more and be more generous with others?
- What can I do to go out of my way to help others?

Leaders that focus on developing a strong network benefit from increased trust and a reciprocity throughout the organization, expanding their influence and ability to make lasting changes within the organization.

EXPANDING INFLUENCE

One definition of influence is "the ability to personally effect other's actions, decisions, opinions or thinking." In the unique corporate structure that we call a partnership, where positional roles do not necessarily equate to real power, the ability to influence others is a critical skill for leaders in law firms.

There are three possible outcomes of influence. The first is *resistance*, which is characterized by minimal response, zero effort and potential conflict. The next option is *compliance*, which generally can be identified by a moderate response with minimal effort. The third outcome is actual *commitment*, where you can see an enthusiastic response with a high level of effort. Sometimes all you need is compliance, for example, merely turning in time sheets on time. It's critical to avoid widespread resistance, and you need strong commitment to make an initiative successful.

In the first issue of *NeuroLeadership Journal*, published in 2008, David Rock claims that social behavior, including decision making, is driven by minimizing threat and maximizing rewards in respect to five domains:

- **S**tatus—our relative importance to others.
- **C**ertainty—our ability to reasonably predict the future.
- **A**utonomy—our sense of control over events and our situation.
- **R**elatedness—our sense of safety and trust with each other.
- **F**airness—our perception of fair exchange between people (think compensation).

The SCARF model is an approach-avoid response system. To gain influence with another person, one must both increase the reward (approach or attraction) and reduce the threat of losing status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness or fair treatment.

For example, when rolling out a new initiative, avoid comparing people's performance publicly or putting into question someone's compensation. Instead, consider ways you could increase public recognition of a person or advance the person's position of responsibility, thus increasing the status rewards.

As you consider your leadership agenda and the importance of gaining commitment for your initiatives, ask how you can reduce the risk of threatening people's sense of status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness. How could you increase their rewards in these areas in return for increased commitment? What's in it for them to support your ideas?

Jay Conger, a professor of Leadership at Claremont McKenna College, has outlined the following strategy for persuading others in a 1998 *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Necessary Art of Persuasion." I suggest you give it a read.

1. *Develop credibility*. Credibility is a function of how people perceive your competency/expertise and the strength of their relationship with you. Make an effort to build a strong track record and focus on building trust, integrity and honesty.
2. *Frame for common ground*. Describe your position in terms that illuminate the advantages to your target audience. Look at it from the other person's perspective. What's in it for them?
3. *Provide evidence*. As in court, make your case. Provide specific facts, numbers and metaphors.
4. *Connect emotionally.* Show emotional commitment, but don't overdo it. Ask, "What if …" and "Imagine that . . .". Use vivid and colorful language.

Remember that people are persuaded not by your conclusions *but how you arrived at them*. They want to know the why before the how.

IGNITING CHANGE

The leadership skills of paying attention, developing strong networks and expanding influence are critical prerequisites for igniting change.

Change, after all, is the holy grail of leadership. We don't need leaders to maintain the status quo. Change is all around us. Clients are changing how they buy and manage legal services. Technology is changing how we deliver services. Competitors are changing how they design, deliver and charge for their services.

Lawyer leaders need to become masters of igniting change in their organizations. Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, the authors of the best-selling leadership book *The Leadership Challenge*, say it this way:

> *"The focus of a leader's attention should be less on the routine operations and much more on the untested and untried. Leaders should always be asking . . .*
>
> > *What's next?*
> > *What's new?*
> > *What's better?*
>
> *That's where the future is."*

Change leaders are future oriented. They are not stuck in the past ("We've always done it this way."). Nor are they preoccupied with the present, spending their time putting out fires and mediating internal disputes. Rather, they are intentionally asking, What's next? What's better?

Leaders create and support the research and development (R&D) efforts of the firm, looking for ways to improve service, reduce cost and meet the future needs of existing and potential clients.

That's right. Each law firm needs an R&D division.

We're seeing some interesting results of recent legal R&D efforts, including:

- Seyfarth Shaw's award-winning Seyfarth*Lean* client service model that improves efficiency, drives down cost and improves collaboration and communication between client and counsel. What client doesn't want that?

- Davis Wright Tremaine's *De Novo* project, which applies technology, data analysis and process improvement science to reduce cost and delivery time for large legal projects.

- Dentons's *NextLaw Labs*, a technology platform that provides increased responsiveness to clients, lowers cost and bridges international and time zone boundaries.

Igniting change requires a clear and compelling vision and the ability to leverage one's network to engage others in that vision. Igniting change is not for the weak of heart. It takes grit and perseverance. Igniting change, however, is the raison d'etre of leaders.

Firms and the profession need leaders who are willing to address many leadership challenges, including developing a diverse workforce, adapting to the unique values and style of the Millennial generation, responding to clients' demands for improved service at a lower cost and many others.

PRACTICE LEADERSHIP

Leadership is a skill. It is like making pancakes. At first the results might be a little messy and not very pretty, but with practice and a few adjustments, you develop the skill to get it right. Try practicing these skills—paying attention, developing your network, expanding your influence and igniting change. Choose one or two things to practice in each area today. You'll be surprised at the results.

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