

Leadership Beyond Lawyers: What Law Firms **Need**

Legal administrators must understand the differences between management skills and leadership skills and how aspiring to leadership represents a unique opportunity to serve their organizations.





BY JEFFREY LAWRENCE

Management skills are vital to a law firm, but even when performed at the highest level, such skills are not the same as leadership. Management is often thought of as the art and science of bringing order and efficiency to people and process. While order and efficiency are essential, most attorneys probably would like someone else to be “managed” or to do the managing. Directing, ordering, and otherwise exercising other forms of authority hold little appeal for most partners.

Exercising *leadership* is much more useful – though rare. Many firms don’t know how to do it, what to look for in candidates in leadership roles, or how to develop them other than by on-the-job-training. In most cases, a trusted member of the support team rises to “chief of staff,” a poorly designed role that resides in the nether world of lots of responsibility and only a fraction of the authority traditionally reserved for the managing partner. Acting outside of their realms of competency for the first time, some people warm to the various skills and practices required in their new roles, but many don’t. Is there hope for those who aspire to attain the skills? Is it possible for them to both lead and manage?

LEARNING HOW TO LEAD

The good news is that leadership is a set of behaviors and therefore, can be learned. Leadership is about mobilizing people to close the gap between their aspirations and their current experience. In the context of the law firm, this could reveal itself as

- an aging group of partners realizing that the successor generation is not ready to take on the firm’s future, for which some accelerated development is needed;
- recognizing a new competitive threat from another firm;
- a merger opportunity with another law office; or
- the firm being referred into a new sector through a merger experienced by a key client.



At the heart of exercising leadership is the service of a higher purpose. It could mean the survival of the firm, maintaining its competitive advantage, or assuring its ability to help those most in need of its services.

Any one of these situations may require the firm to develop competencies outside its current repertoire. Attorneys are most comfortable deciding issues within their areas of specialty or what it will take to finance a deal. However, a plethora of things necessary to running a high-performing firm reside outside their comfort zones. Experimentation and learning are examples of areas that are often left to the partners to decide, but do they? And who *carries out* implementation?

KEY ELEMENTS

Progress on these questions requires the skills and practices of leadership, including the following:

- **Identify the Adaptive Change.** In order to meet the demands of a changing environment, the entire firm (attorneys and staff, individually and collectively) has to adapt. The leadership skill here is to help everyone see the gap, identify obstacles, and formulate experiments to see what works and, as importantly, what doesn't. It also means helping people sort out the technical problems (those for which we know the solutions) and the adaptive challenges (those outside the current repertoire, requiring learning – and sometimes loss).
- **Garner Attention.** If the firm's attention is drawn to this work in a routine way, it will think of it as "more of the same." Exercising leadership means helping the firm recognize this is the work of closing the aforementioned gap and is anything but business as usual. The feel of the familiar coupled with the possibility of loss make even the most knowledgeable legal minds close like a bear trap. Think of this closing of the traps as a beginning point, not the end. Another critical element is surfacing competing views. If you have identified the right questions to ask – some might say the right "sacred cows" to slaughter – you will find attorneys and staff on both sides of the issue. This tension is actually a great source of creativity that needs orchestration. Don't rush in too aggressively to calm it. Vigorous debate and introspection must be nurtured to achieve a strong leadership culture.
- **Develop Responsibility.** Attorneys will sometimes be happy to let the legal administrator or other staff person who is striving to exercise leadership carry on alone. Remember that the key word in the definition of leadership was "mobilize." This means giving them back the work that they're trying to hand off to you, turning up the heat, highlighting the gap and what it means to each and every member of the firm, and helping them prepare to accept casualties (those who cannot change). The desired result here is ownership of the adaptive work by all stakeholders in the firm.
- **Regulate Disequilibrium.** "Turning up the heat" means causing people to experience disequilibrium – a sense of discomfort that indicates things are about to or in need of change. Just as it takes a little heat to get things cooking, too much heat can cause people to become threatened into debilitation. Regulating disequilibrium means finding the right balance –



enough to get things going, but not enough to burn the firm. There is no precise formula. It requires monitoring the affected people for clues and, yes, experimenting.

- **Infuse the Work with Meaning.** Why bother with this kind of work at all? At the heart of exercising leadership is the service of a higher purpose. It could mean the survival of the firm, maintaining its competitive advantage, or assuring its ability to help those most in need of its services. Whatever the purpose, it must appeal to the affected parties at a significance for which they will endure discomfort to achieve. Whoever takes on the role will best serve the firm by orienting to this purpose. For non-attorneys, being of use in this work, particularly in stressful transitions, is the best way to build credibility beyond their own technical or functional specialties and earn the trust of the partners for more challenging leadership work to come. A key reason to take on these kinds of roles in a firm is a deeply held belief that you can make a contribution to this orienting purpose.

OPPORTUNITY AWAITS

Many a firm has killed off its management people for asking the tough questions and challenging sacred cows. Because leadership is difficult, many lawyers opt not to get involved with it. This creates great opportunities for legal administrators and functional specialists in firms (such as human resources professionals) to step into this vacuum. Given the danger, this is not for the weak of heart, but it is well worth the effort. ✱

about the author

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