

LAW FIRM LEADERSHIP

Did you ever dream of being the best at something or playing for the best team? I always have. As a result, I have always wanted to learn what separates the best from those who are really good.

When I was growing up, I read biographies about leaders. Even today I enjoy reading about the most successful leaders. Why are some leaders so successful? What does it take to be a successful law firm leader or practice group leader? The answers are fairly obvious. But, if they are so obvious why isn't everyone doing what it takes to become successful?

Five Essential Keys to Successful Law Firm Leadership

1. Credibility

First, a law firm leader must be honest, ethical and credible. In their book *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner reported the results of 1500 interviews with managers across the United States. When asked to identify the characteristics and attitudes they believed to be most important for effective leadership, the most common responses were: (1) integrity (leaders are truthful, are trustworthy, have character, have convictions); (2) competence (leaders are capable, productive, efficient); and (3) leadership (leaders are inspiring, decisive, provide direction). In virtually every survey the authors conducted honesty was the most identified characteristic of an effective leader. The next three were forward-looking, inspiring and competent. These add up to credibility.

These findings should come as no surprise. Many leaders have articulated them without the benefit of a study. Dwight Eisenhower once said:

"In order to be a leader a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence, the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office. If a man's associates find him guilty of being phony, if they find that he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. His teachings and actions must square with each other. The first great need, therefore, is integrity and high purpose" (Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Great Quotes From Great Leaders*, ed. Peggy Anderson, Lombard: Great Quotations, 1989).

In difficult economic times, a law firm leader's credibility and integrity are even more important. They will be measured by his actions far more than his words and by how he acted from very early stages in his career. Did he share work and credit? Did he mentor and coach younger lawyers? Did he put the interests of clients and the firm ahead of his own interests? Was he a team player? The answers to all of these questions define credibility. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you are saying."

2. Purpose

Second, a law firm leader must be able to express the firm's purpose. James Collins and Jerry Porras in *Built to Last* define purpose as "the set of fundamental reasons for a company's existence beyond just making money." In the context of a law firm the question is why are the firm lawyers practicing together, beyond the notion of profits per partner? The firm leader or practice group leader must convey the message in a way that convinces the lawyers and staff that they are making a difference to the firm's clients and to each other.

3. Vision

Third, a law firm leader must be able to express his or her vision for the firm in a way that creates excitement in the firm. Almost nothing energizes people more than feeling they are a part of building something special. When President Kennedy expressed the vision that the United States would land a man on the moon by the end of the decade, people were energized and inspired. In 1963, when Martin Luther King expressed his dream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, many in the nation could actually visualize a day when the sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners could sit down at the table of brotherhood. Obviously a law firm vision is not as dramatic as going to the moon or overcoming prejudice, but the firm leader can convey a sense of hope, opportunity and a "can do" spirit to lawyers and staff. He can let everyone know honestly where is the firm now, where it is going and how firm members can contribute and work together to get there.

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins suggests that good to great companies determined what they could be best in the world at, that is economically profitable and that there is a passion within the company to accomplish. I suggest that if a law firm focused on providing unprecedented client service, had the most highly trained lawyers and staff in the country and used technology and knowledge management better than any other law firm, great things could be accomplished and lawyers and staff would be energized to be the best.

4. Culture and Core Values

Fourth, a law firm leader must be able to both articulately express the firm's culture and core values and to make sure the firm acts consistently with those core values. In *Aligning the Stars*, Jay Lorsch and Tom Tierney describe culture as "a system of beliefs that members of an organization share about the goals and values that are important to them and about the behavior that is appropriate to attain those goals and live those values." They say that culture "encompasses beliefs about everything that goes on in the firm." The leader must convey to insiders and outsiders in specific language what the firm is all about, what is the soul of the firm and what makes it a special place to work and for clients to be served. Firm culture should be an integral part of new associate and lateral hire orientation. More importantly, the firm leader must make sure the firm culture plays a pivotal role in decisions about hiring, compensation, bonuses, expansion and client intake.

5. Standards

Fifth, a law firm leader must clearly articulate minimum standards. Actually, “minimum” is not the best word because the standards should actually be very high. Each lawyer should know clearly what is expected of him or her and then must be held accountable with consequences for non-performance.

Each day a firm leader must be passionate about the firm, its clients and its people. He must demonstrate through his actions and words that he cares, that what each lawyer or staff member really matters and that the firm exists to serve its clients. One of the ways to accomplish this is to get to know the firm lawyers and staff and its clients. A firm leader must listen to them, understand what makes them unique, learn from them and encourage them.

As a final thought, I believe law firm leaders must not take themselves too seriously. They need to have a sense of humor. I will end with another quote from Dwight Eisenhower:

. . . a sense of humor can be a great help—particularly a sense of humor about (oneself). William Howard Taft joked about his own corpulence and people loved it; took nothing from his inherent dignity. Lincoln eased tense moments with bawdy stories, and often poked fun at himself—and history honors him for this human quality. A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done."

Not taking one's self too seriously conveys credibility and sincerity to those who choose to follow.