The Struggles of Lawyer-Leaders and What They Need to Know

By Roland B. Smith

Today, lawyer-leaders must be as agile as white-water guides in treacherous rapids. The current global economic downturn has created enormous uncertainty. While certain firms and practice areas have directly benefited from the downturn, most need to think more strategically and swiftly in determining how best to navigate the rapids of change. Lawyer-leaders are discovering that being in practice today is like being in a state of perpetual whitewater.

Law firm leadership differs from practice management. Leadership is about producing change, while management focuses on producing predictability over processes. As part of a series on the changing nature of leadership in law firms, this article explores the leadership of law firms today and the skills necessary to succeed, thrive and soldier forward during uncertain conditions. It draws from ongoing research by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), involving hundreds of attorneys in both global firms and midsized U.S. firms. It also draws from a survey of more than 100 senior or managing partners who participated in a leadership training program designed for senior executives. This article will look at the issues the partners identified, along with insights derived from a recent New York Bar Association seminar entitled “Leadership Skills for Lawyers.”

Revisiting the Challenges and Lawyer-Leader Concerns

In recent years, law firms have faced a range of challenges – including industry consolidation, increased client demands, competition for talent and the emergence of nontraditional competitors.

The current global economic crisis is intensifying many of these competitive pressures. As a result, industry consolidation is expected to continue and possibly to accelerate. In some cases, consolidation is occurring out of opportunity; in others, it is out of necessity. Some firms have even dissolved under the weight of the pressure.

As the crisis deepens, clients are becoming more selective about using legal services. At the same time, they...
Defining Leadership Within Law Firms

If leadership is about producing dramatic change with an extremely useful outcome, then what kind of leadership skills do attorneys need to develop? The list below summarizes what managing and senior partners said when asked what they hoped to learn by participating in a leadership development course.

Leadership Development Needs Identified by Managing and Senior Partners

1. How do I communicate more effectively?
2. How do I listen better?
3. How can I learn to be more patient?
4. How can I become more self-aware?
5. How can I increase my ability to influence others?
6. How do I lead change successfully?
7. How can I drive innovation?
8. How do I increase my credibility as a leader?
9. How can I delegate more effectively?
10. How can I increase team performance (client team, firm leadership, practice group, regional office, firm-wide)?
11. How can I improve as a leader while maintaining my rainmaker status?
12. How do I get partners to find the right balance between personal and firm success?
13. What should the definition of a leader be within the context of a law firm, and how do you make it (leadership) work tactically and practically?
14. What leadership qualities are critical and which are “nice to have”?
15. How do I handle the added pressure that comes with being in a leadership position within a firm?
16. How can I improve my ability to develop associates?
17. What should I be doing to mentor new partners?
18. How can I better understand the new generation of lawyers?
19. How can I improve my leadership image?
20. What do I need to know to motivate underperforming partners?
21. How do I better manage difficult people?
22. How effective am I in providing feedback to others and how can I improve?
23. How can I regain some of my enthusiasm for practicing law?
24. How can I translate my confidence as a lawyer into confidence as a leader of lawyers?
25. How can I manage my time more effectively? What are some tools?
26. What are the strategies other lawyer-leaders use to set priorities?
27. What can I do to improve my strategic thinking, decision making and tactical business leadership skills?
The wish list articulated by firm partners who were beginning their leadership development journey confirms that though technical excellence and intellect are critical factors for success as a lawyer, emotional intelligence is the differentiating factor for successful leadership.8

Developing emotional intelligence starts with becoming self-aware. You are able to read emotions, recognize their impact and appropriately use gut feelings to inform and guide decisions. You can pursue an effective parallel success strategy for your practice group, regional office or firm by complementing technical and professional expertise with new leadership capabilities.

As an effective lawyer-leader, you will be more strategically agile and able to successfully navigate the rapids of change that are characterized by complexity, economic turbulence and growing competition.


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**Next Steps for Lawyer-Leaders: Thinking and Acting Beyond**

The first step in improving your effectiveness as a lawyer-leader is to admit you need help. This is less about disclosing your vulnerabilities and more about developing humility. After acknowledging a need for change (either for yourself, your group or your firm), you are in a position to move forward. Reflecting on your abilities relative to the 30 questions above is a first step. Accepting feedback from others on your effectiveness as a leader and determining how you need to improve is another.

Because leadership is not currently taught in law schools in any significant manner, you should not be surprised that leadership skills development is an issue. Furthermore, you should not be too hard on yourself, your leadership team or your firm if you are not yet successful in this area. It was not so long ago that firms and lawyers first acknowledged the need for “practice management.”

While the passage from law school to lawyer can be difficult and may require support, the journey from lawyer to lawyer-leader can be even more treacherous. It requires self-awareness, flexibility and the acquisition of new skills, knowledge and experiences. The challenges of an ever-changing environment make leadership development an imperative, though. Firms can no longer assume that leaders will simply emerge from the ranks.

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