THE LEADERSHIP CONUNDRUM

Simon Sinek may have said it best during his 2014 TED Talk: "In the military, they give medals to people who are willing to sacrifice themselves so that others may gain. In business, we give bonuses to people who are willing to sacrifice others so that we may gain." While this might not paint a perfectly accurate picture of leadership in all law firms, it strikes a nerve.

DEFINING AND REWARDING LEADERSHIP

Consider how you define and reward leadership in your firm. Leaders are frequently rewarded financially based on the amount they can bill or the value of the clients they originate. Other leaders are rewarded based on the success of the team or practice group. Sadly, leaders are too often put in the position of having to choose between team success or personal success. We task our leaders with the impossible: build a successful team, have trust, be a great communicator, bill 2100 hours a year, and make enough rain to ensure that your entire team meets their annual billable requirement. Who do your leaders feed first? If there is billable work to be had, do they pass it to their team so they can be successful, or do they keep it for themselves to enjoy personal success? The answer to that question will help you determine whether you have genuine leaders.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERS

Leadership is a tricky thing, and we see firms every day making leadership decisions based on tenure, experience, and the appearance of authority—not because a person actually possesses leadership traits, but rather because they want to "be in charge." Experts in the area of leadership suggest that people are good leaders when they make a conscious decision to sacrifice themselves for the good of their team or people. These experts use terms like clarity, decisiveness, courage, passion, humility, confidence, selflessness, and empathy. You will see qualities of leaders described as "doing what you say, giving credit, taking blame."

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

People are not inherently leaders because they are partners, because they "bought in," or because they are subject matter experts in a particular practice area. People are not "leaders" because they are amazing rainmakers, because "clients love them," or because they are well-spoken or published. Graduating first in your class or being on law review doesn't matter when it comes to leadership. What matters is one's ability to create teams of people who trust them, to teach, to mentor, to hear, to adjust, to change, and to support. It is about someone's ability to share a vision and to get others to want to follow and support them.

CHOOSING LEADERS BASED ON QUALITIES, NOT TENURE

It is also important that you do not let your "org chart" pick de facto leaders. You have to be willing to consider that a less experienced attorney might have extraordinary leadership capabilities—and that might mean that they lead a team of people that includes partners and more senior associates. Step away from the org chart and make your leadership decisions based on leadership qualities, not tenure.

EVALUATING LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

Determine whether the "leaders" in your organization are successful by asking the people they are supposed to be leading how they feel. Do not avoid the question because you are afraid of the answer. If you wonder whether leadership is having a negative impact on your team, look at turnover and read exit interviews. Understand why people have left the firm.

According to a March 11, 2013 article by Alan Hall in Forbes magazine, 74% of people would consider finding a new job – and the article points to a study by Accenture that indicates that the reason for their unhappiness is 1) They don't like their boss (31%), 2) A lack of empowerment (31%), 3) Internal politics (35%), and 4) Lack of recognition (43%).

More recently, and specific to the legal profession, a 2021 Thomson Reuters report indicated that 54% of lawyers under 40 said they were likely to leave their current job in the next 5 years. Setting aside strategic moves, the most cited reasons for leaving were:

MENTAL HEALTH

The high-pressure environment of law can lead to mental health challenges. A 2021 survey by the American Bar Association found that 41% of respondents were considering a career change due to burnout. Additionally, a study in the Journal of Addiction Medicine revealed that 28% of practicing attorneys struggle with depression, with more recent reports suggesting this number is closer to 38%.

LACK OF GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities for professional development and mentorship are vital for junior lawyers. The 2022 Midlevel Associates Survey by The American Lawyer found that only 65% of associates were satisfied with the training and guidance they received at their firms. Those who feel stagnant or unsupported in their career growth are more likely to seek firms that offer clear paths for advancement.

NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENT

A negative workplace culture can drive even the most dedicated lawyers away. The ABA's 2020 survey on lawyer well-being found that 67% of respondents had experienced anxiety, with many citing workplace stress as a contributing factor. Creating a positive, inclusive work environment is essential for retention.

DESIRE FOR AUTONOMY

Many junior lawyers value autonomy in their work. A 2021 Gallup poll found that 61% of millennials (who make up a significant portion of junior lawyers) say the opportunity to learn and grow is extremely important to them in a job. Firms that empower their associates to take ownership of their cases and decisions will likely see higher engagement and loyalty.

Law firm leaders face these challenges. Your firm is not unique in having them and, given the issues' commonality across the profession, highly unlikely to avoid them. As effective leaders, being liked is a start, but only a start. Effective leaders also empathize and empower their teams. They avoid letting internal politics influence decisions. They give credit to their team before themselves.

INVESTING IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

If you look at the people you have designated as "leaders" in your company and they don't appear to be sacrificing themselves for the good of their team, it doesn't mean they are not a valuable, talented, smart, integral part of your firm. It also does not mean they cannot become great leaders. You must invest in them and develop their leadership skills with training and mentoring. We often say "just because you can play does not mean you can coach." Firms tend to pick their best lawyer or best paralegal and put them in a management position with absolutely no training, guidance, or mentoring. If you discover that no amount of mentoring or training will improve someone's leadership skills, you may have to make a tough decision. They are still on the team; they just can't be the coach.

EXPANDING ON LEADERSHIP

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a critical component of effective leadership. Leaders with high EI are able to understand and manage their own emotions, as well as recognize and influence the emotions of others. This ability fosters a positive work environment, enhances communication, and builds strong relationships within the team.

DEVELOPING A LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

Creating a leadership pipeline involves identifying and nurturing potential leaders within the organization. This process includes providing opportunities for professional development, mentorship programs, and leadership training. By investing in the growth of future leaders, firms can ensure a steady supply of capable individuals ready to take on leadership roles.

BALANCING LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

While leadership and management are often used interchangeably, they are distinct concepts. Leadership involves inspiring and guiding others towards a common goal, while management focuses on planning, organizing, and coordinating resources. Effective leaders must balance both roles, ensuring that they not only motivate their teams but also manage tasks and processes efficiently.

THE ROLE OF DIVERSITY IN LEADERSHIP

Diverse leadership teams bring a variety of perspectives and experiences to the table, leading to more innovative solutions and better decision-making. Firms should strive to promote diversity in leadership by creating an inclusive culture, addressing biases, and implementing policies that support equal opportunities for all employees.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

Leaders must be adaptable and open to change. This includes staying informed about industry trends, embracing new technologies, and being willing to pivot strategies when necessary. Adaptable leaders can navigate uncertainty and guide their teams through transitions effectively.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is essential for maintaining high performance and achieving organizational goals. Leaders should set clear expectations, provide regular feedback, and hold themselves and their teams accountable for their actions. A culture of accountability fosters trust, transparency, and a sense of ownership among team members.