

Essential Leadership Traits for Law Department Managers

From the Experts

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Have you ever watched a coxswain in action during a competitive rowing race? His job is to navigate the boat through the water as quickly and as efficiently as possible by ensuring that each member of his crew rows in unison to the beat he sets. He serves and leads at the same time. A strong law department manager does much the same thing. Her job is to help navigate the client through treacherous waters by ensuring that her team works together to deliver legal services efficiently and well. She sets the tone and the expectations that her team is to meet while providing each member with the support he or she needs. This is leadership in action.

While the ability to lead comes naturally to some, most of us must learn and develop the skill. Unfortunately, the practice of law does not always lend itself to developing leadership skills. The demands of the job, cost constraints and other stresses conspire against such seeming luxuries as leadership training. But for a law department manager, good leadership skills are not luxury items—they are essential to his or her ability to provide outstanding legal services.

This article discusses six essential leadership traits that every law department manager can and should fold into the conduct of his or her day-to-day responsibilities.

1. Character

Character, or integrity, is perhaps the single most important trait of a successful leader, because it serves as a litmus test for trustworthiness. Simply put, it is hard to lead those who do not trust you. The challenge in incorporating this trait into everyday practice is that too often we treat character as an afterthought—everyone likes to think of himself as a trustworthy soul, so why focus on a non-issue?

It is easy for a manager to overlook that she is a continual subject of conversation among the group she leads. Thus, her actions and her words are subjected to constant and heightened scrutiny. A failure to remember this can lead to problems, and it is something easily forgotten.

Managers want to relate well with the people in their group, but it is difficult to be both boss and friend. If two colleagues share an off-color story at a bar after work, they may not give their conversation much thought the next day when they are both back in the office. A leader, however, does not have that luxury. If he says something inappropriate, even during happy hour, it won't be long before the entire group knows of it. And the reaction will be far different than if the comment had been made by a co-worker. Simply put, there is no "off-duty" conversation between a leader and her followers.

A leader's character must be above reproach, and he must demonstrate in his daily interactions that he is a person of integrity. One of the authors witnessed a character misstep early in his career: A more senior lawyer had directed a subordinate to withhold potentially harmful documents from a discovery production. The junior lawyer explained that no privilege attached to the documents, but the senior lawyer maintained his instruction. The junior lawyer appealed to others for help in resolving their disagreement. The senior lawyer offered a "beyond the scope" justification for his instruction, but after further consideration, agreed that the documents had to be produced. From that time forward, however, other lawyers were leery of working with him. They were concerned that he would allow his responsibility to zealously represent his client overshadow his obligation to do the right thing. In short, he had failed the litmus test for trustworthiness.

2. Commitment

A leader must be committed to both the organization for which he works and the employees he leads. The two responsibilities may sometimes appear to conflict, but they shouldn't. A "yes" person—a leader who always, eagerly and unreservedly embraces the company line no matter what—may suffer from a credibility challenge. But a leader can support the organization's position while respecting the fact that some in her group may have reservations or doubts about it. A leader who has the trust of those he leads and the respect of those to whom he reports can ask for his group's support while ensuring that their questions or concerns are heard and considered by those up the chain.

To gain that trust, a leader must demonstrate, through actions as well as words, his commitment to support those in his group. During his service as a lawyer in the Air Force Judge Advocate General's

(JAG) Corps, one of the authors observed first-hand the harm that flows from a leader's failure to show commitment to those he leads. The author and his team spent several weeks preparing for a visit by the Judge Advocate General, also known as an Article 6 visit, which included several briefings. As part of the team's preparations, a senior JAG from higher headquarters visited the author's team to assist in the preparations. The senior officer arrived on a Thursday and the team performed a "dry run" of the Article 6 visit. The senior JAG informed the team that the presentations were subpar and directed the team to make dozens of changes before leaving for a three-day weekend.

The team worked through the long weekend to make the changes in time, but it would have been a much easier task if the senior JAG had been made himself available. He knew his team would follow orders, but in choosing to absent himself, he lost their respect and their trust. Sometimes, leaders can extract obedience simply because of where they sit in the hierarchy of command. But successful leaders do not depend on enforced obedience. For successful leaders, loyalty is freely given.

3. Competence

To successfully lead, you must have the requisite skills, experience and knowledge to do the job. Presumably, you have risen to a leadership role by demonstrating that you do. Others look to you not only as a person who gives orders, but as someone who could carry them out as well. A truly competent leader, however, possesses sufficient self-awareness (and humility) to recognize when she needs help and has the confidence to ask for it. For some, this self-awareness comes naturally. Others must have it thrust upon them.

A few years ago, one of the authors was asked to head up a team charged with developing certain social media policies. The other team members were IT professionals from various business units across the country; the author was a lawyer from corporate HQ. The IT professionals had an "if the technology lets us do it, we should do it" mindset. The author believed that company values and goals should drive policy, with technology serving as the vehicle to make that happen. But the author realized that the IT professionals saw him as someone who lacked the technical knowledge to form an opinion worth listening to. So he asked the IT professionals to be his teachers and learned everything he could about the technology involved. Only after the author understood where they were coming from was he able to gain their attention. In the end, they came together to recommend policies that took advantage of evolving technologies while reflecting company values and goals.

4. Communication

A good leader communicates well with his team, but there is no magic formula that makes such communication happen. It takes an investment of hard work and time to develop successful communications. As a new lawyer in the Air Force, one of the authors worked for a senior lawyer who made that investment. She led a team that consisted mostly of new and inexperienced lawyers. She made clear to them that open communications were critical to achieving success. As

she put it, “I can’t help you if you don’t ask questions. If you ask, we can solve the issue together. If you don’t ask, we will both end up in trouble.”

To ensure that her words turned into their actions, she empowered them to ask even “dumb” questions. No matter how “dumb” the question, she provided thoughtful responses. Her willingness to invest this time fostered and enhanced an environment of open communication between her and her team.

5. Courage

Courage comes in many forms, and it is not always flashy or obvious. Ernest Hemingway once described courage as “grace under pressure.” John Quincy Adams stated that, “courage and perseverance have a magical talisman, before which difficulties and obstacles vanish into thin air.” Many years ago, while still a mid-level associate, one of the authors witnessed Hemingway’s definition and Adams’ observation applied in a quiet, understated way. During a private mediation session, the mediator expressed—in quite intense language—doubts about a section of the mediation brief that the author had drafted and even questioned whether it had been made in good faith. The partner listened patiently, and rather than do what many others would have, i.e., turn to the brief’s author for a response, took personal responsibility for the brief. Neither his voice nor his demeanor betrayed any sign of stress. He calmly explained that he stood behind every word of the brief but was grateful for the opportunity to address the mediator’s concerns. He then proceeded to do so, point by point. By the time he finished talking, the mediator was nodding his head in agreement.

In a few short minutes, the partner displayed a number of leadership traits—character, competence, commitment and perhaps most of all, courage. He was a study of grace under pressure, and his willingness to stand fast in the face of hostile fire caused the obstacles before him “to vanish into thin air.”

6. Compassion

The practice of law can be quite stressful. While some types of stress might actually improve performance—e.g., some people perform better under deadlines—unnecessary stress almost always proves detrimental. One way for a leader to minimize stress is to remember that he works with people—who are spouses, parents, children, siblings or grandparents—and not just bodies bearing job titles and responsibilities. They have outside lives, and what happens outside of work can often impact job performance. A good leader understands this and endeavors to give support where possible and appropriate. A leader who is so self-absorbed that she fails to understand this risks losing the loyalty of her team.

Early in his career, one of the authors worked for a partner who made very clear that his only concern was his own welfare. He regularly imposed demands designed solely to establish that he was in control, and he refused to accommodate even the most exigent of circumstances. Not surprisingly, the turnover rate among associates on his cases was quite high. Other partners who dealt more kindly and more fairly with associates were rewarded with loyalty and dedication.

Sometimes our better natures get lost in the press and stress of everyday business. Taking the time to think about the traits discussed in this article, and taking steps to incorporate them into your daily interactions with those you lead, can help ensure that your law department team successfully provides effective legal services to the clients you serve.

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