

Jump Into the Pool: What it Takes to Lead

By Deborah Williamson
Texas Lawyer

September 23, 2013

In deciding whom to select as first chair for a major piece of litigation, lead counsel in a complex transaction or heading a law firm, the questions are the same: Does the lawyer have the expertise and experience? What results has the lawyer achieved? There are volumes written on how to gain expertise, experience and results in the actual practice of law. While the criteria may be similar, the path to law firm leadership has a significantly different goal. Leadership means bringing a team; swimming alone isn't leadership. It also takes more lead time and, perhaps most importantly, requires the successful candidate to decide affirmatively that she wants to lead.

A recent survey by the public relations firm Zeno Group found that just 15 percent of women between ages 21 and 33 would want to be the head of a large organization. The number is about twice for men.

The first step, particularly for women, is to ask: "Is there any possibility I will ever want to hold a leadership position?" If the answer is "no," don't discount that you may feel differently in the future. Goals can change.

If the answer is "maybe" or, even better, "yes," it is never too early to begin to develop the résumé of an obvious candidate. Developing the expertise, experience and demonstrated results necessary to become a leader of lawyers (not quite an oxymoron, but often close) is a marathon, not a sprint.

Future leaders develop expertise in leadership through study and observation. Many books and articles sketch out the characteristics of a good leader. Reading them offers insight into different leadership approaches. The would-be leader may disagree with those authors. She'll certainly find conflicting opinions. She may grow frustrated or even discouraged. But, with persistence, she will begin to identify her own leadership attributes and start to incorporate the characteristics she admires and can emulate. No one style works for everyone.

DIFFERENT STROKES

Like swimming, people can't learn leadership only through research. You should consciously begin to observe different teams, in different settings and then evaluate why any particular team is successful. There are as many leadership styles as there are people, but some styles can be more successful than others, depending on the person, the situation and the goal. You also need to recognize that there are some styles which you just cannot (or should not) emulate. Faking a particular style is exhausting and, ultimately, just won't work. If nothing else, the lack of authenticity will undermine any ability to gain the trust of lawyers — a notoriously skeptical group. It is also important to realize that good leaders adapt their style to a particular situation. Leading a trial team to victory is different from convincing lawyers to agree on almost anything. At trial, someone has to make the ultimate decision on which witnesses to present and the lead counsel either makes that decision or affirmatively delegates the decision. Equally important, sometimes it just isn't possible to fully articulate why a particular witness is important — it often seems more like instinct, hopefully based on knowledge of the judge or the jury. With a group of lawyers, leadership takes more than making a decision. It requires an ability to persuade, a willingness to listen, a sense of trust in both your judgment and that you are "firm minded," and the ability to articulate why a particular decision is both well-thought out and in their best interest.

INDIVIDUAL MEDLEY

Experience in leadership should be developed from both inside and outside of a firm, so dual track your leadership path. Identify opportunities where you can accomplish a common goal. In other words, get out of your office and talk to people. Emails rarely reflect leadership. While you can run a meeting by telephone, in person is always better. Start small and grow. Volunteer to chair a sub-committee in a bar association or your favorite nonprofit. Better yet, identify a need and volunteer to put a group together to solve the problem. Stand up, ask to be put on a trial team, and carve out a portion that you can organize and lead to completion (well before any deadlines). Ask to be on a committee at your firm. A bit of initiative often results demonstrating that you: 1. know how to work with a team; 2. can help focus the team on the problem or goal; and 3. have the skills to lead the team to reach the goal or solve the problem. Use all the strokes to get you to where you want to be.

THE RELAY

Once you are in a leadership position, you need to exceed expectations. You should also identify other potential leaders and help create leadership opportunities for them, particularly for attorneys in your own firm and then let them see you lead.

Also, let others know you have been a successful leader. Go to your LinkedIn Profile, your firm web page and your

"long" résumé and note your accomplishments. Then focus on the next leadership goal. Most important, remember to regularly update that profile as you move into increasingly important leadership positions, dropping off those that no longer reflect your increasing expertise, experience and results in leadership.

THE FINISH LINE

The legal profession is continuing to struggle with the advancement of women into equity ranks and in leadership positions in law firms. However, a viable pool of effective and experienced leaders can only be created when women decide to become qualified to jump into the pool and swim the race. Whether you want to actually get wet is a decision for another day but Bill Crosby probably said it best, "Come on in, the water's fine."

Deborah Williamson has been elected the managing director of Cox Smith effective Jan. 1, 2014. She has led the firm's bankruptcy department for much of her tenure at the firm.