



Is Leading Lawyers Impossible?

One of my favorite Super Bowl commercials is a 60-second spot for EDS that ran in 2005. The music is straight from an old spaghetti western. Men on horses ride over a ridge and the camera zooms in on a wrangler holding a black-and-white photo next to a horse with a grey cat sitting on the saddle. “This man right here is my grandfather. He’s the first cat herder in the family.” Stetson-wearing cat-herders with gruff voices reflect on their profession with quips like:

“Herding cats – don’t let anyone tell you it’s easy.”

“Being a cat herder is probably one of the toughest things I’ve ever done.”

“Not everyone can do what we do.”

The camera pans across thousands of cats running through the prairie as one cat-herder sums it up, “It ain’t an easy job, but when you bring a herd into town and you ain’t lost a one of them – there ain’t a feeling like it in the world.”

Leading lawyers is a lot like herding cats. Lawyers, and those who work with them, tend to have extreme personality traits that help them be good lawyers, but perhaps difficult leaders. Not long ago, law firm leadership guru David Maister wrote in **The American Lawyer**,

“After spending 25 years saying that all professions are similar and can learn from each other, I’m now ready to make a concession: Law firms are different.

The ways of thinking and behaving that help lawyers excel in their profession may be the very things that limit what they can achieve as firms. Management challenges occur not in spite of lawyers’ intelligence and training, but because of them.

Among the ways that legal training and practice keep lawyers from effectively functioning in groups are

- *problems with trust;*
- *difficulties with ideology, values, and principles;*
- *professional detachment;*
- *and unusual approaches to decision making.*

If firms cannot overcome these inherent tendencies, they may not be able to deliver on the goals and strategies they say they pursue.”

Is leading lawyers impossible? No, but it can feel like it sometimes.

Is Leadership Important?

Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, said, *“Only three things happen naturally in organizations: friction, confusion and underperformance. Everything else requires leadership.”*

The legal marketplace continues to change at a rapid pace. Clients are exerting unprecedented buyer power, dictating how fees are charged, services performed, invoices billed and matters staffed. Management systems, such as attorney compensation, associate development and client satisfaction assessment are changing. Firms are investing in business development training, hoping to change attorney’s selling habits (or lack thereof).

Changing behaviors, whether they are related to client service, business development, or instituting new management systems, is the primary challenge facing law firms today. The only way to change behavior is the change culture. Culture defines what behaviors are acceptable, what actions are encouraged and what attitudes are tolerated. How does one shape culture? Only through intentional leadership can one craft culture.

Despite the many challenges, many firms have strong leaders that are effective change agents. I’ve found that some law firm leaders share the following traits:

Identify as a Leader

These lawyers and staff see themselves as leaders first, whether or not they hold a formal management position. In fact, many people are effective leaders without the title or role. They perceive opportunities to make a difference and act on them in the best interest of the firm. They understand that their highest value to the firm is not necessarily billing more hours or reducing expenses, but rather helping change the culture that will allow the entire firm to become more profitable. These leaders take initiative and model the behaviors and attitudes they want to encourage in the firm. They ‘walk the talk’.

Inspire a Shared Vision

Law firm leaders who cast a clear, challenging and compelling vision of the future and inspire others to buy-into that vision are more likely to attract loyal followers. People want to know where their leaders are taking them, how they will get there, and why it is important. Leaders need to be able to articulate a positive future reality and explain the steps required to get there.

Leaders not only need to cast a vision, but engage others in achieving it as well. In law firms, the process of engagement resembles the give-and-take of negotiation. It is best done in one-on-one conversations, not in group meetings. It requires the leader to understand the interests of others and align those interests with those of the leader and the group. Leaders need to have an answer ready when followers ask, “What’s in it for me?”

Innovation

Lawyers are risk-adverse and taught to act only after precedence is established. How often have you heard the manta, “Who else is doing this and are they successful?”

Successful law firm leaders buck the trend by leading innovation and being a champion of new ideas. Leaders need to constantly challenge the status quo, experiment with new projects and look outside of the legal profession for ideas and inspiration. Innovative approaches to marketing, business development and client service can build team engagement and spirit. It's fun to try something new and creative.

As Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner write in ***The Leadership Challenge***, "The focus of a leader's attention should be less on the routine operations and much more on the untested and untried. Leaders should always be asking... What's next? What's new? What's better? That's where the future is."

Implementation

Law firm leaders know that action counts more than elegant plans and concepts. The most successful leaders have a laser focus on getting things done. They are skilled project managers and delegators. They set specific goals, measure important metrics, and obsessively track progress until a project is completed. They figure out how to use budgets, standards, timetables and expectations to their advantage. They anticipate conflict and use diplomacy and peer pressure to communicate the consequences of non-accountability.

Law firm leaders also realize that they can't do it all by themselves. They have to build a team dedicated to getting things done. Leaders shift their thinking from believing that they are the only person who can do it right to believing that it is their job to equip others to learn new skills and perform at the same level or higher than they could do it themselves. Through teaching, coaching, praising and giving feedback, leaders develop high-functioning teams.

Intimacy

Finally, insightful law firm leaders realize that it is their responsibility to create an atmosphere where people want to work together. They foster an environment of trust, so that people can work to their fullest capability without being second-guessed or constantly criticized. They encourage a sense of community, where each person knows and cares for each other personally. These leaders build a team where giving and receiving feedback is part of a continual process of improvement. They understand that they must first model trust by being open to ideas, trusting of others and having unquestionable integrity.

Leading people in a law firm is a lot like herding cats, but as the cat-herder said in the commercial, "It ain't an easy job, but when you bring a herd into town and you ain't lost a one of them – there ain't a feeling like it in the world."

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