

Leading in Challenging Times

These are challenging times for law firms. Most of the AmLaw 200 law firms have experienced layoffs, affecting both attorneys and staff, including the marketing and business development functions. Client demands and buying patterns are changing. Demand for legal services is down. Some practice areas are experiencing unprecedented drought. Some have practically disappeared altogether.

Law firms are changing too, in some cases dramatically. For the past few years managing partners were dealing with the “war for talent”, \$160,000 associate starting salaries and global domination. I don’t have to tell you what’s on their mind today.

Attorneys, many experiencing a diminished workload and fearing for their own job, are knocking on the marketing department’s door looking for the magic seminar or e-newsletter series that will transform their practice overnight.

Law firm marketing departments are trying to deal with more work with fewer staff in a high-stress and uncertain environment. A recent poll of corporate leaders showed that 59% are working longer hours, 65% are taking on more responsibilities, 58% are doing more with less reward and 68% are experiencing increased work stress. The others, I presume, have been laid off.

Are you depressed yet? Feeling more than a little anxious? You are not alone. Times of uncertainty and layoffs often lead to negative emotions, a lack of trust in management, and a decrease in productivity.

So, what is a CMO or Marketing Director to do in the midst of such chaos? If there is ever a time your team needs leadership, it’s now. Here are some leadership tactics that will not only help your team survive the crisis, but strengthen it through the process:

1. **Be Authentic** – The most important tactic is not a tactic at all. It’s about connecting with others by being who you are as a leader and a person. Being authentic means being honest and open to others’ ideas, comments and feedback. Researchers Barry Posner and Jim Kouzes polled thousands of followers, asking this question, “*What do you most look for and admire in a leader, someone whose direction they would willingly follow?*” The top response was “Honest” with more than 88% of people reporting that it was the most important quality of a leader.

Bill George, author of “Authentic Leadership” defines it: “Authentic leaders know who they are. They are “good in their skin,” so good they don’t feel a need to impress or please others. They not only inspire those around them, they bring people together around a shared purpose and a common set of values and motivate them to create value for everyone involved.”

Authentic leaders set the tone in their team for an open and honest culture. They know their own values and understand how to translate them into what the team does and how they treat each other. They trust others and earn their trust back. It’s about being real, which will instill confidence and trust in a time when these are scarce commodities.

2. **Work on Communication** – Focus on clear and frequent communication within your team and with other leaders in your firm. Too often communication evaporates in the cloud of rumors and fear of downsizing. Communicate to your entire team about what is going on with the firm and the marketplace openly. Inform them of decisions and insights as quickly as you can to minimize gossip. Double the frequency of communication.

Consider holding Un-Exit Interviews. Exit interviews are intended to reveal what motivated people to leave the firm. Instead, meet with staff one-on-one to increase engagement. Ask them about what may be dragging them down, what both of you can do to increase their engagement, what can be done to reduce their anxiety, or what project or learning experience that they could start that would increase their interest in work.

Give people room to experience the range of emotions that come with working in a chaotic and stressful environment. Be empathetic – take other people’s perspective into consideration before you take action or give feedback.

3. **Promote Learning Agility** – As marketing and business development teams are downsized while more is expected from the team, you need to create a culture of continuous learning. Staff members will be delegated new responsibilities and expected to learn new skills. Now is the time to cross-train your staff, build competency depth and invest in learning. Often, staff feels overwhelmed with new projects and added responsibilities. Try re-framing the situation as an opportunity to learn new skills and gain credibility with the attorneys.
4. **Be Bold** – Get out of your comfort zone and try new things, even if it is difficult for you. Try going against the grain if you think the risk will result in your team learning something important or the firm will gain something of significance. Times of crisis often open opportunities to stand out from the competition. Make a difference by attempting something innovative. Creativity will get you noticed, especially in a marketplace that is saturated with bad news. People are willing to tolerate discomfort of change if it leads to learning and achieving a higher goal. Bold and innovative projects often create an esprit-de-corps that builds confidence and credibility among your staff.
5. **Be Optimistic, but Realistic** – It is hard to be optimistic when you find yourself checking the www.abovethelaw.com blog for the latest news in law firm layoffs, hoping not to read about your firm (or your job!). Your team looks to you to set the tone, provide hope and show that the light at the end of the tunnel is not a freight train coming your way.

Focus on appreciating the positive. Focus on good things that are happening in your team and in your firm. For example, many firms are seeing attorneys who once thought marketing was a four-letter-word now calling for business development coaching and marketing services. Focus on giving positive feedback to your staff and others in the firm. Be specific, timely and public with your praise.

Still, you need to be realistic and truthful. A Pollyannaish approach will quickly erode credibility. It’s a fine line that leaders need to walk.

6. **Sense of Urgency** - Having a focus on action and implementation will create a culture that allows your team to adapt quickly to change and will build credibility among your internal clients, the lawyers. Be a leader who is always looking to initiate action and keep things rolling. Focus on helping your staff finish projects and how to improve the process. There is nothing like getting things done, and done well, to communicate the value of the marketing staff to the partnership.
7. **Realize that people deal with change differently** – Be aware of your reactions to change. Observe and understand how other people react to change. People may feel fear, anxiety, and defensiveness. They may become terse, uptight or downright bitchy. Some will complain more and others will completely shut-down. It is important to talk about the changes going on and how it affects your team. Your role is to model healthy coping behavior and to make it OK to talk about change. You also need to communicate that some reactions to change are not healthy for the team and not tolerable.
8. **Manage Your Health** – Before an airplane takes off, the attendant gives the safety speech, “In the event of decompression, an air mask will fall from the ceiling, providing oxygen. Put the mask on yourself first, and then help your companions.” Before you can help others you need to take care of yourself. Good leadership is tied to good health and exercise. People are more likely to follow a leader that is in good physical, mental and emotional health. Take time to recharge once in a while. Going 100 miles per hour 24/7 will lead to unproductivity in the long run. Find ways for you and your team to take a break and have some fun once in a while.
9. **Have Vision** – Despite what some law firm leaders are saying to their firms, survival is not a vision. You need to have a compelling, inspiring vision of the future that motivates people to reach beyond what they think they are capable and willing to do. People are willing to undergo a lot of stress, work and pain to achieve a common, challenging goal that benefits everyone. Your job is to articulate your vision and a plan that clearly illustrates how your team will get there together. Everyone on the team needs to understand their role on the team and how their efforts will help the team fulfill its vision. What’s your vision?

These are indeed challenging times for law firms. Strong leaders can take advantage of the recession to build a strong team, initiate structural and cultural change and deepen one’s own leadership skills. As economist Paul Romer said, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.”

Mark Beese is President of Leadership for Lawyers, a consultancy focused on helping lawyers become stronger leaders and business developers. Find him on the web at www.leadershipforlawyers.com. He blogs at www.leadershipforlawyers.typepad.com

Copyright 2009, Leadership for Lawyers LLC. Please do not reproduce without permission from the author. First published in *Marketing the Law Firm* Newsletter.

Leadership for Lawyers, LLC

www.leadershipforlawyers.com

Mark Beese, Principal