



Leading in a Time of Change

By Larry Richard

During the economic turbulence of the past two years, most law firms have rightly focused their attention on managing their finances -- cutting expenses, supporting profitable practices, trimming headcount, etc. At the same time, firms have paid less attention to leadership. Ironically, it is during this time of great upheaval that the need for leadership is greatest.

Management and Leadership are not either/or systems -- each serves a different purpose, and they can, and in fact, should, coexist if the conditions that necessitate both of them are present.

WHAT ARE THOSE CONDITIONS?

According to Harvard Business School guru John Kotter, management is a regulatory system designed to address complexity and create order. It's mainly internally focused. Leadership, by contrast, is designed to guide people in the face of external uncertainty and change. By definition, leaders take risks, set a direction, and use interpersonal skills to get others on board to follow in that direction.

For too many years, law firms have been overmanaged and underled. By dialing back their attention to leadership during the recent economic downturn, law firms have widened this gap at just the wrong time. Here are some suggestions for redressing this imbalance:

Make leadership important. For lawyers in leadership roles, the temptation to manage and not lead is seductive. The skills that lawyers are good at -- gathering data and quickly absorbing new information, analyzing data, applying principles of logic to the data, setting up structures and rules -- are quite useful in the management role. So it's not surprising that most lawyers in leadership roles would prefer to manage.

By contrast, most lawyers are less comfortable using the skills that are essential to leadership -- envisioning, experimenting, building rapport with people and winning over their hearts as well as their minds by evoking an emotional response, and motivating others.

Another reason to elevate the importance of leadership is that uncertainty and external change cause a measurable negative impact on the performance of people inside an organization. In response to external uncertainty, groups and teams perform more poorly than at other times. Individuals are more distracted, irritable, and inefficient. Effective leadership can restore optimal functioning of your lawyers, or at least reduce the negative effects of uncertainty. Especially in uncertain times, leaders need to set clear goals, provide direction, and offer emotional reassurance to their constituents. These steps can reduce the negative effects noted above, and increase the possibility of goaldirected behavior. Concrete steps that leaders can take include simple things like having more face-to-face meetings with your constituents, providing more frequent updates about management decisions, firm finances, strategic initiatives, personnel changes, and other changing information, and meeting more frequently with office managing partners and practice group leaders.

Paying More Attention to Leadership

If a law firm leader wants to pay more attention to leadership, what specifically should s/he zero in on? The essence of leadership is articulating clear goals, and then getting others on board to follow those goals. Attention in each of these areas will strengthen your firm.

Articulating Clear Goals

By nature, most lawyers are very cautious with information. Client confidentiality is not only mandated by all codes of professional responsibility -- it's also ingrained in our thinking within the legal culture. Good leadership, by contrast, calls for more openness and clarity. Good leaders make public commitments to stretch goals. It makes them more accountable. Don't fall into the trap of keeping your goals private "just in case" you don't reach them.

Clear goals actually have a positive psychological effect on constituents. People are more likely to be mobilized from thought to action when the goals are clear, especially if the goals meet three criteria -- 1) They are collective in nature ("Let's work together to secure that company as a firm client" as opposed to "Everyone should bill 5% more time by the end of the month"); 2) They are meaningful. A good, simple test of this criterion is to ask yourself, "Will the lawyers in my group/my firm/my office feel proud if we accomplish this goal?" and 3) They are specific and measurable, e.g., there's a target date ("We'll secure that client by June 30") or there's a simple yardstick ("We'll have a signed engagement letter by the time of our next quarterly meeting.") Research shows that all three of these criteria tend to mobilize people to action.

Clear goals not only lead to action, but can also improve attitude. The Gallup Organization has studied employee engagement for many years. They have identified 12 questions which, when answered in the affirmative, are predictors of engagement. The number one predictor is "Do I know what's expected of me at work?"

Getting Others on Board

How do you do this with intelligent, skeptical and very autonomous lawyers? Start with low-hanging fruit. Research and common sense tell us that leaders that enlist the cooperation of the willing "early adopters" can often have small successes that defy the skeptics, and then build on these early successes to bring others on board.

It's equally important to create a sense of urgency. John Kotter, now Professor Emeritus at Harvard Business School, has spent the past 15 years researching and writing about the central importance of this one step in getting individuals in organizations to buy into top-down efforts at change. If you read any of his books -- Leading Change, Heart of Change, A Sense of Urgency, and others -- you can hear his thinking about the steps that leaders need to take in order to get people on board with and actually moving toward a new vision.

But the most important point, which he makes emphatically in Heart of Change, is that whatever you do, you have to do it in a way that evokes an emotional response, not just a cerebral response, in your constituents. In my experience, leaders in law firms fall short in this one area to their own disadvantage. It's understandable -- as lawyers we're trained to rely on the intellect, and we're continually rewarded for doing so. Ample research (see our recent study on lawyers' personalities at <http://www.hbrconsulting.com/Understanding-Lawyers-11-15-2010>) shows that intellectual stimulation and problem-solving is far and away the most important criterion for most lawyers. It's why they enter the profession and it's what gives them sufficient enjoyment to stay in the profession. Unfortunately, this love of the cerebral is equally true for lawyers in leadership roles. That means that if you're a leader and you're reading this article, you may either resist my plea to you to evoke an emotional response as a way of moving your lawyers toward the desired vision, or you may take it seriously but unwittingly approach it in an intellectual way nevertheless.

The truth is that law firms need to train their leaders to be far more effective than has been the case in most firms to date -- mainly by paying less attention to the cerebral and more to the visceral level. "Emotion" comes from the Latin "motere" -- to move. Studies of leaders in a wide variety of settings reveals that the most effective leaders are superb at setting very clear, compelling visions for a specific outcome, and they are equally skilled at evoking a visceral response that motivates people to move toward that envisioned outcome.

For lawyers, establishing the clear vision is not the hardest part. The more challenging task is leading change as an emotional exercise rather than a logical one. We are so steeped in the value of rational thought that most law firm leaders, even though they know it won't work, rely on building a logical as their main tool for leadership.

Jonathan Haidt, the author of The Happiness Hypothesis, uses an updated Platonic metaphor, proposing that our emotional side is like an elephant, and our intellect is like the rider. When they agree, no big deal; but when they don't see eye to eye, the elephant easily wins.

Leaders need to guide the rider, i.e., establish a clear vision that makes logical sense, but much more importantly, they need to capture the elephant's attention by inspiring, provoking, titillating, or otherwise arousing a passionate, visceral response from their constituents.

In summary, I recommend that you try one or more of the following steps:

1. Pay more attention to leadership. Make it more important.
2. Articulate and disseminate clear goals.
3. Create a sense of urgency. Get the "elephant" as well as the "rider" on board with those goals.
4. Begin to identify up and coming leaders in the firm. Build a leadership pipeline, starting at the point of new hires.
5. Train your leaders to look for new opportunities and take aggressive advantage of them. Our research shows that lawyers are naturally conservative and change averse. But these tendencies can be overcome by carefully selecting the right people to place in leadership roles, and through proper training.
6. Make sure that the most senior leaders in the firm behave in ways that are consistent with the behaviors that they are asking of their constituents. Leaders need to be role models. It makes a world of difference in their effectiveness.
7. Consider implementing an Action Learning or other truly experiential approach to developing your leaders' leadership skills.

If you follow these guidelines, you will have positioned your firm for greater success in uncertain times.

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Over the past 20+ years, Dr. Richard has worked with hundreds of law firms and corporate law departments to improve human performance in ways that improve the bottom line, increase satisfaction, and promote teamwork. Prior to becoming a consultant, he was a trial lawyer for ten years in Pennsylvania and New York.

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