

Feature

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Leading lights: Leadership tips for the modern law firm

There is a prevailing view that great leadership comes naturally. That doesn't necessarily mean, however, that the right attitude and behaviours cannot be learnt.

Law firms are investing considerable resources and effort in the whole area of leadership, from creating dedicated leadership-assessment centres, to executive coaching and implementing long-term leadership-development programmes. Still two questions remain largely unanswered in firms, which go to the heart of whether or not leadership-development programmes can be effective and reap the rewards in practice. First, are leaders born or made? And second, as a follow on, can you really develop leadership in people? In this article, I look to answer these questions through a potted history of how the research and thinking has developed in the leadership arena. I will also look at what firms can do to maximise the effectiveness of their investment in this area.

The earliest theories of leadership, particularly in western cultures, focused on the notion that history is one of great men and their influence on society. This approach led scholars to examine and try to identify the characteristics of these great men. It was on the basis that their success as leaders was derived from a heroic set of personal characteristics (or traits) that the 'trait theory' of leadership emerged. Since then, however, studies have revealed a much more complicated leadership picture: that no one set of traits are clearly associated with effective leadership. (Some such trait studies even identified a few amusing correlations. For example, effective leaders are either taller or shorter than normal.)

The leadership picture developed further in the 1960s, when scholars and practitioners began to recognise that a leader's effectiveness was not simply linked to leadership traits, but that it was highly dependent upon the context in which leaders were operating. This led to the notion that different situations benefited from different leadership styles. The 'situational approach' to leadership was born. So, for example, when managing a crisis, a more directive leadership style is seen to be most effective, while in trying to bring out the best in people and foster collaboration, an inspirational style is seen to be better.

Today, studies and research have moved on further – leadership is not seen to revolve around a set of traits or characteristics inherited at birth, but to be more related to behaviours, attitudes and values. It is also widely accepted that different situations will require a leader to be flexible in the way he or she acts and behaves, adapting one's style and behaviours to suit the situation at hand. So, on the basis that effective leadership is more about behaviours and their flexible application, then it follows that people can learn to develop leadership behaviours, and leaders themselves can be developed. In this way, leaders are both born and made: effective leadership is a function of doing the right behaviours and having the right attitudes, and yet the ease or difficulty with which one learns these behaviours and attitudes is strongly influenced by the personality traits and other innate characteristics of the individual.

In addition, by decoupling leadership from personality traits, we can see how many people at different levels in the firm can exercise leadership, without operating from a nominated position of leadership. So, rather than define leadership as a set of personal characteristics, or as a position of authority, it is more useful to define it as activities and behaviours – as a verb rather than a noun. This recognises the behavioural components of leadership, that it takes place at many levels in the firm and that different leadership behaviours will be required in various situations and cultural contexts.

Successful leaders (with or without a position of authority) engage in the following activities:

- Creating a vision. This involves creating a vision that, both in the organisational and individual context, engages the hearts and minds of people. By engaging the minds it speaks to the rational business case for why a firm should seek to position itself in the market in a particular way. As important, but often forgotten, is the engagement of the hearts of people within the firm. This aspect appeals to people's passions and

emotional connections with the desired future state. Unlike appealing to the minds that will require objective market studies and financial-performance analysis, appealing to the heart will require more personalised examples, such as specifying the potential threats of losing (or opportunities to gain) specific clients, work and reputations. In the end, it is the emotional connection that moves people to follow a leader, and the more cognitive rationales that help those followers justify and become comfortable with their new behaviours;

- Demonstrating the behaviours required to support the vision and strategy. Leadership is not the isolated act of an individual, but a series of activities carried out by many people, not just the managing or senior partner. To direct activity in the same direction, a leadership model can help to identify the specific leadership competencies and behaviours that are to be encouraged and developed. This will vary depending on the market and cultural context of the firm and the strategy it is pursuing. In law firms, however, with the increasing focus on institutionalising the client base, and integration across offices and practices, there are some behaviours that are seen to be very critical, such as collaboration, team work and sharing. People watch what leaders do. The leader's actions symbolically take on more significance than the actions of peers, and thus have more influence on the behaviours of followers. Conversely, a leader who asks partners to turn in their timesheets on time and fails to do so herself is bound to fail;
- Enabling people to face rather than avoid tough realities. Once a vision, strategy and desired behaviours are set, a key activity of leadership is to highlight the gaps that exist between this desired future state and the current reality. The leader then has to encourage conversations and identify actions to close the gaps. This is risky work that requires courage and perseverance;
- Fostering cohesion. Good leaders know how to move people towards common ground rather than allowing splintering and inter-group conflict. The leader's key tools here are active listening, an accepting rather than judgemental attitude, and encouraging participation instead of the leader doing it all without help;
- Rewarding and celebrating. To keep people moving towards the inspired vision, it helps to periodically stop and take stock of the firm's progress, celebrate the achievement of milestones and recognise individual contributions.

Leadership as a collection of behaviours can be learnt and taught. A firm can undertake a number of activities to develop the expertise of its leaders:

- Once the leadership model is created, these leadership behaviours need to be interwoven throughout all of the HR processes – attracting talent, recruiting, selection, firm initiation and orientation, training, coaching and development, making partner, and developing leaders;
- The professional development and training programmes need to focus on the development of skills and behaviours. Unlike traditional professional development, leadership development is behavioural rather than technical. Learning a skill involves a completely different type of learning than lawyers are used to. Most technical legal skills are essentially cognitive, and can be taught in a one-off workshop, whereas leadership skills require a more complex approach to be taught effectively. This includes demonstrating the proper skill, skill practice, feedback and time between learning sessions to integrate the learning with real-world challenges. Firms need to adjust to this longer and more complex learning model if they truly wish to see their lawyer leaders become demonstrably more skilled;
- Broaden professional-development programmes. The most successful leaders have a higher than average level of self-awareness. There are a range of individual assessment tools that can be used to provide leaders with feedback – measures of personality, emotional intelligence and leadership style, to name a few. Behavioural development is also intensely personal, as no two individuals share the same history and personal make-up. Executive coaching can provide lawyers with the personalised support, objectivity and guidance on how to effectively develop their leadership behaviours;
- Planning and commitment are essential. Individual development plans help provide clarity and commitment.

Finally, there are a number of activities that individuals can focus on at a personal level to sustain leadership:

- Reflection. To examine and review your own behaviours and the impact you have on others. The ability, through reflection, to set aside your own assumptions and be open to listening and learning from others in the firm;
- Conviction. To develop and trust your own value system, and convey that either implicitly or explicitly to others in the firm;
- Connection. To remain in touch with the hearts and minds of people around you, and to take steps to minimise the isolation that can come with a leadership role;
- Rest. Essential to restore perspective, relax and recharge your batteries.

The importance of effective leadership in law firms is now widely accepted, and researchers and practitioners have shown that leadership skills and behaviours can be developed. The next challenge for leaders of law firms is to become serious about the need for intensive skill-based training, rooted in sound behavioural science, which can produce tomorrow's crop of visionary law-firm leaders.

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