

Reaching Goals Through More Effective Leadership

By Nancy Byerly Jones

(previous version also published by Lawyers USA and multiple seminar sponsors nationwide)

Please take a minute to think about some effective leaders from within your community. You may know them personally or just know of them. It does not matter if they are lawyers or not – just that in your opinion they are excellent and effective leaders.

Next, and with at least one actual leader in mind, create a list of at least fifteen characteristics that would describe that person. A small sampling might include: Are they good listeners, fair, patient? Do they have integrity? Are they good time managers and planners?

Please hold onto the list you've just made. We'll get back to it.

Your Firm's Leaders And Managers

Who are the leaders in your firm? The managers? Sometimes that's not so easy to answer unless, of course, you are a solo. Even as a solo, however, are you the real leader and manager on a daily basis or do you willingly and regularly pass those responsibilities to a staff member? Have you thought about the different responsibilities held by leaders and managers? How do those roles differ in your firm or do they?

Leaders vs. Managers

Leadership and management are indeed different concepts. Extremely simplified definitions of each of these terms follows.

A manager oversees and handles the day-to-day issues that must be addressed in order to carry out the firm's objectives (e.g. personnel issues, financial reports, computers and other technology, keeping up with and ordering office supplies, etc.). A firm's leader plays the role of visionary, change master, motivator and the "buck stops here" decision-maker for an office.

If leaders try to take on the manager's role as well, they risk spreading themselves too thin. They are also more likely to get so busy managing the day to day stuff that they fail to do the leadership-type of things they need to be doing for the long term welfare of the firm. This includes those matters that a firm's leadership needs to do such as creating short- and long-term action plans for the firm and ensuring that a productive and realistic marketing plan is being carried out.

Of course if you are a solo and don't have a true legal administrator on board, you are wearing both the leadership and manager hats by necessity (and both roles are just as important within the solo practice as it is in the larger firm). The wearing of dual management/leadership "hats" can be done quite successfully as long as solos know when to change hats during the course of a workday. That's not always so easy unless we truly appreciate and understand the critical need in every law office for an effective leader *and* an enthusiastic manager.

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Reaching Our Goals Start At The Top

Switching gears a bit and asking you to think for a moment about what your goals are for yourselves and your firms. Are you reaching your goals each year? Do you know what your goals are or do you primarily feel you must function in survival mode only? If so, you may also be thinking, “Who has time to sit down and make a list of their goals, much less make them happen!?”

Could your firm be defined as a threshold practice because you tend to take any and every case that crosses your threshold? Or, have you taken the time to design short and long term plans (“roadmaps”) for yourself and firm? If so, you know that by doing so you have greatly increased the odds that every decision you must make - big or small - will be made with your “roadmap” of desired goals in mind. Therefore, each decision made will directly or indirectly help you in moving steadily toward your goals.

It’s easy to talk about our goals. Turning our aspirations and good intentions into reality, however, is the real challenge considering our 90 mph worlds. Just surviving one day at a time seems to be a worthy accomplishment and unfortunately in the midst of such chaos, many of our goals remain aspirations that never stand a chance of being brought to life.

There are ways to stop the vicious cycle and it begins at the top with good leadership.

Leadership

Many times we select leaders for our firms who are “in name only” leaders. These folks like the title but not all of the responsibilities that a true leader must bear. Sometimes it’s just easier to put our heads in the sand than it is to face the anguish and exhaustion of making tough decisions (e.g. terminating unsatisfactory employees, etc.). Unfortunately the “costs” of not facing the music are high and include such losses as lower productivity, increased malpractice risks and poor office morale.

Many good articles and books have been written about leadership and I encourage you to do your own reading about successful leaders and about what leadership is and isn’t. For the purpose of this column, however, we will address only a few issues surrounding this critical but tremendously important subject matter.

Yesterday vs. Today’s Law Firm Leaders

It is indeed much more of a challenge to be a leader in today’s high tech, fast-changing legal environment and that’s true whether you are a solo or a member of a much larger firm. It wasn’t that long ago when one of the biggest challenges facing multi-attorney firm leaders was how to divide the pie fairly.

Further, we have a wider diversity among lawyers who are practicing together today that creates many benefits and challenges. We now have generational issues to face such as:

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- older lawyers who feel you can't be a "real" lawyer unless you put in 80-plus hours a week and younger lawyers who insist on hanging onto a decent quality of life;
- lawyers who are not ready to retire, but whose younger partners feel they should be; and
- senior lawyers who seem not to care what happens to the firm when they retire or what kind of legacy they will be leaving behind them (e.g. they put off dealing with succession planning issues; they continue to horde their clients instead of helping to build a good bridge between their clients and the firm's younger attorneys, etc.).

In addition, today's young attorneys have issues to deal with that older lawyers did not. Some of those things include:

- the increase in competition which is also far more cut-throat competition in today's world – externally and internally in many firms;
- the absolute need for lawyers to be smart and savvy businessmen and women as well as excellent lawyers;
- higher client expectations and demands for immediate turnaround;
- decreased loyalty from firms to employees;
- decreased loyalty from employees to their firms; and
- a cancerous growth of "me-only" attitudes instead of team spirited attitudes and actions

Taking A Look In The Mirror

We're all pretty good about thinking we know how others could improve their personal interaction, communication and leadership skills. When, however, was the last time you took a good look in the mirror at *your* strengths and weaknesses? It's a good idea from time to time to stop your world long enough to conduct a mini-self audit regarding your leadership skills. A very short sampling of the questions you may ask yourself includes:

1. Do I have a realistic long-term plan/vision for my firm (and one in keeping with the times and reality) and has it been communicated clearly with all employees?
2. Do I set examples with my habits and behavior that are consistent with what I preach and demand from others?
3. Do I do a good job at keeping employees motivated?
4. Do I adapt to change well and enthusiastically or do I cling hopelessly to worn out systems and traditions?
5. What would others have to say about me as a leader (he's honest, fair, enthusiastic, a good listener, organized, a good communicator, decisive, has vision, follows through, etc.?)
6. If this were my last day at my firm, would I be leaving it with a solid, realistic and "doable" plan for its future growth and prosperity?

Staying Motivated And Motivating Others

If you are truly happy with what you do then it will radiate to all those with whom you work. If you are fighting chronic burn-out, unsatisfied with the practice of law and more frustrated than not with

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your work then this too will be felt by your peers and staff and such feelings can be highly contagious to say the least.

Motivating others is not as difficult as it may seem when we are truly in touch with the pros and cons of our own work assuming, of course, the positives outweigh the negatives. If this is not the case, motivating others is next to impossible because our actions do indeed speak so much louder than our words.

Motivational skills and leadership are inherently linked. Likewise, listed below are a few other suggestions for improving the leadership within your office:

- Make sure you have clear rules and procedures within your office and that they are enforced consistently and fairly. Nothing lowers morale quicker than attorneys within a firm having different rules and privileges for certain employees (e.g. an attorney who allows his/her assistant to consistently come to work late without repercussion while other staff members are expected to come in on time). This does not sit well with those who make the effort (and in many cases, special arrangements such as child care), to reach the office at the designated starting time each day.
- There's an old saying, "When I'm right who remembers and when I'm wrong who forgets?!!" Make sure that when constructive criticism is needed that it is given in private. Likewise, make sure that you give praise openly when deserved—a simple thank you goes a long, long way and is all too often forgotten in the shuffle of your many to do's on any given day.
- Resolve any underlying tensions among the partners or associates. I often hear attorneys say that no one else in the firm knows they have an unresolved "issue" with one of their partners. Not so! While others in the firm may not know just what the "issue" is, they do indeed sense, see and suffer from the tensions emitted by feuding attorneys. We humans will always have our differences and opinions, but we should practice good common sense to deal head on with any such disputes so that we can move on with life in a positive manner. To put our heads in the sand only enlarges the problem whatever it may be and sends out the wrong message to everyone else (e.g. it gives "permission" to the firm's staff to act in the same child-like manner of ignoring their differences and holding long-time and destructive grudges).
- Take care of yourself! We all know that without our good health, nothing else matters and yet, it seems like we continue putting ourselves last when it comes to healthy diets, time off and exercise. While common sense "ain't" always so common, it just makes good old common sense to take better care of ourselves and to encourage all those with whom we work to do the same. And yet, just the opposite happens all too often in too many firms. Not only do some folks not plan for and take the time to take healthy breaks from the office, they try (and unfortunately usually succeed) to make their associates and staff feel guilty for any sick or vacation days taken. Attorneys who act that way are shooting themselves in the foot because the best employees any of us can have on board are those who take care of themselves. There is no better recipe for success than to encourage your legal to maintain a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives.

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Back To Your List

At the start of this article, I asked you to make a list of the characteristics of an effective leader. I also asked you to highlight those attributes on the list that you felt you either did not have or need to improve upon. Now, please prioritize those characteristics to which you need to give some attention. Select two or three things from the list to start working on immediately.

Please keep this list where you can access it easily for the next thirty days and look at it often each day. That will help you stay the course as you work toward strengthening that characteristic within your personal leadership skills. After you feel you have indeed improved in certain areas, move on to the next two or three attributes on your priority list. Work on those as long as necessary to make any needed changes stick and so on.

Once you have completed your entire list of improvements needed, is that all you need to do to be an effective leader? Of course it isn't. Learning more about what leadership is and isn't, however, and working on improving your own leadership skills is a big step towards ensuring that your firm's goals and aspirations become realities. Give smarter and more effective leadership a try. It sure beats the heck out of working amidst the chaos generated by a threshold-driven, out of control practice.