

Your Connection  
to Success

By Sandra J. Wunderlich

Taking four steps can help a firm close the leadership gap. Organizations that do so will thrive.

# Closing the Leadership Gap in Law Firms

*Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future.*

—John F. Kennedy

Now more than ever, we need great leaders at law firms. The legal industry is undergoing unprecedented changes. There are many economic forces driving these changes, including flat demand for legal services, increased competition among law firms, clients demanding more for less, and alternative service providers entering the market and performing tasks that lawyers previously did. There are also socioeconomic factors at play: changes in the attitudes among the workforce, several generations working in the same environment, and an increased willingness of attorneys to make lateral moves. Firms depend on their leadership to guide them through these challenges. But are we equipping these leaders with the skills that they need to do the job?

Most lawyers instinctively recognize the connection between leadership and success in any endeavor. Yet the legal industry lags significantly behind other industries

in training and developing the future leaders of their own firms. This is evident in the number of firms that lack a defined succession plan or a ready pipeline of qualified leaders, which are considered two of the greatest challenges facing firms today.

Traditionally, law schools have not offered classes on leadership. And although law firms recognize the need for associate development and training in the technical aspects of practicing law, few have formal programs designed specifically to develop leadership skills. When lawyers reach a certain point in their practice, they often are asked to take on leadership roles in the firm—whether as practice group leaders or managing members. This is true even though most lawyers have not had any formal leadership training. But what makes a good law firm leader of both peers and subordinates is different from what makes a lawyer good at delivering excellent client service. Although it is critical to recognize that a different skill set is needed, most firms don't.

For example, many law firms continue to use the wrong criteria when choosing leaders. At best, law firms choose managing partners and practice group leaders according to their ability to develop cli-



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ent loyalty or their reputations as excellent lawyers, due to the widespread belief that these skills will translate into effective leadership of the firm. The title comes with prestige and thus is used as a reward for being a good lawyer. At worst, firms reward those with seniority or those who will not “rock the boat,” or they offer leadership promotions to appease complainers. Some firms use leadership positions to improve their diversity profile, without giving any real authority to the individuals moved into those positions to bring about change. Although choosing lawyers with a proven ability to attract and develop clients, and with great legal skills, creates buy-in from the other attorneys, they are not the only skills that a lawyer needs to become an effective leader of his or her firm.

Lawyers also tend to be risk averse, which makes them good at their job but which does not lend itself to strong leadership of peers or subordinates. Lawyers’ personality profiles show that they score high on risk aversion and low on resiliency. Taken together, this translates into people who don’t like to take chances, and people who want to be liked. A leader that values being liked over being respected will not succeed. Such leaders avoid confrontation, and thus avoid addressing difficult situations that arise. A leader who fails to address problematic behaviors of lawyers in their practice group, such as bullying, mistreating staff, or not being a team player, will cause the firm to lose productivity and eventually talent because talented lawyers and staff will eventually seek a more collaborative work environment. Moreover, a leader must be willing to take risks to lead. This means taking personal risks such as being authentic and admitting mistakes, but it also means taking risks that will lead to growth rather than simply trying to maintain the status quo.

There are steps that a firm can take to close the leadership gap. The first step is to recognize the characteristics that make a good leader. Understanding the elements of good leadership allows a firm to identify attorneys who possess more of these ideal characteristics when the firm makes leadership decisions rather than simply rewarding business development or political savvy. The second step is to choose current and emerging leaders who exhibit these characteristics, while recognizing

that no one person is likely to have all of the characteristics that make a good leader without further development. The third step is to implement a training program to assist in the development of leadership characteristics through feedback, practice, and evaluation. Finally, a firm must include a critical evaluation process to measure leaders’ effectiveness with an eye toward improvement and growth.

### Step 1: Recognize the Characteristics of Effective Leadership

*If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.*

—John Quincy Adams

Defining the desirable characteristics of a leader is a critical first step to improving the leadership in any organization. Yet many firms never take the step of writing down what they are looking for in a leader so that it can guide their choices. They follow the approach of “we know it when we see it.” But actually identifying the traits of the ideal leader allows a firm to prioritize the characteristics of leadership needed for each role and leads to better choices.

It goes without saying that competency in the field is a prerequisite for any leader. People will not follow someone that they do not believe has the basic skills necessary to succeed as a lawyer. But what else, in addition to competency, makes someone a good leader? Fortunately, there is no shortage of leadership books that attempt to describe the primary characteristics of effective leaders. In my research, nearly every leadership book that I reviewed identified five necessary, core skills of effective leadership. Although they used different terms for them, I sum them up as follows:

- **values**—integrity, honesty, trustworthiness
- **vision**—forward looking, inspirational, strategic thinking
- **interpersonal skills**—empathy, conflict management, team building
- **personal skills**—self-aware, self-controlled, welcomes constructive criticism and input
- **action-oriented**—communicator, decision maker, takes ownership

These five core competencies of leadership provide a starting point for firms seeking to identify and develop potential leaders.

### Step 2: Choose the Right People to Lead

*One of the most painful mistakes of leadership is choosing the wrong leaders.*

—Dan Rockwell

Selecting the right people for leadership positions in an organization is critical to its success. Using this framework of core competencies, firms can develop a profile

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of attorneys who exhibit these characteristics, even if they are not fully developed.

When appointing lawyers to leadership positions, firms should be wary of selecting people with a high need for approval. These individuals tend to shun criticism and avoid making any real changes for fear of alienating others. They also fail to confront difficult situations, preferring instead to allow them to linger to “keep the peace.”

A candidate for a leadership position should also welcome diversity of opinions for the betterment of the team. Valuing different points of view grows the organization because the collective insight of the group is better than a single thought process. Leadership candidates must welcome new ideas and new ways of doing things. They must create an open forum in which to discuss ideas without fear of judgment. It is only when you consider all ideas and are open to new ideas that the organization can grow.

The ability to build authentic relationships is a critical component to the success

of any leader. Ultimately, the success of a law firm depends on the ability to engage all members of the firm. Where people feel respected, understand the firm's strategic plan, and recognize their role in it, they will achieve far greater things than each individual could do alone. Leaders must be able to inspire, not just compel or direct their followers.

## The most successful

firms in the future will be deliberate about their selection and development of leaders who can sustain and grow the business of the firm while also developing its greatest assets: its people.

It is also important to select leaders who understand the effect that they have on their entire team. Leaders who are mindful that their actions and emotions are contagious learn to control their negative emotions and encourage a positive working environment. The best leaders develop their skills while giving their subordinates the opportunity to develop as well. There is nothing that drives away talent faster than the feeling in someone that his or her skills are not being put to use or that they cannot develop them further in that environment. If someone's role does not keep that person challenged and engaged, he or she may seek opportunities elsewhere.

### Step 3: Train Leaders to Lead

*Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.*

—John F. Kennedy

For many decades it was believed that leadership was innate rather than learned, but more recent research indicates that leadership skills can be developed through persistence, practice, and honest feedback.

Thus, the concept of a “natural born leader” is a bit of a myth. Of course, some people exhibit leadership characteristics from an early age, but studies suggest that 70 percent of leadership skills are learned through training. By investing in leadership training, a firm creates an organization that values and encourages the development of those skills, leading to more qualified leaders from which to fill the leadership roles in the firm.

The need for leadership training at a law firm is critical, particularly when law schools and law firms have not invested in the intentional development of leadership skills. There are many options for training programs to develop leadership skills. They range from off-site leadership forums and classes to individual coaching sessions. Encouraging lawyers to take on leadership roles in the community can also assist a firm in developing leaders. The key is for the firm to be intentional about the process to close the leadership gap.

### Step 4: Accountability

*A culture of accountability makes a good organization great and a great organization unstoppable.*

—Henry Evans

Performance evaluation is an essential element for improvement. Traditionally, managing partners or practice group leaders are judged by the success of the entire firm, or economics alone, rather than the clear metrics for which they are responsible. Evaluating leaders in this way misses an opportunity for growth because it can allow deficiencies and vulnerabilities to remain hidden and therefore unaddressed.

Instead, firms should set clear expectations for a leader so that the leader knows how his or her performance will be measured. Some relatively simple aspects of leadership that should be evaluated include such things as retaining talent or maintaining the respect of subordinates and peers. Having self-control and the ability to listen and accept input from the entire team are crucial leadership components, but they are rarely measured or assessed.

After attorneys reach a certain level of achievement, they naturally resist the idea of performance evaluations. But fear of criticism can stunt the growth of the organization and the leader. Allowing evalua-

tions by team members, anonymously, to encourage candor, helps a leader to know his or her strengths and weaknesses and realistically assess what is working and what is not. Moreover, it allows the firm to confirm that its values are being passed on through the leadership. This also allows the firm to measure the effectiveness of its leadership training programs.

### Benefits to Firm

*The achievements of an organization are the results of the combined effort of each individual.*

—Vince Lombardi

There is no doubt that great leaders make great organizations. The most successful firms in the future will be deliberate about their selection and development of leaders who can sustain and grow the business of the firm while also developing its greatest assets: its people. They will be places that nurture leaders rather than simply reward seniority or business development efforts. These firms will have their own pipeline of qualified leaders who are ready to take charge in their community as well as the legal field. The depth of their bench of leaders will give them a competitive advantage over those firms that don't invest in the development of future leaders.

Empowering employees to lead also enables a firm to grow its market share and to retain key talent. Investing in the personal development of these leaders may just solve some of the more pressing issues that law firms struggle with, such as the diversity of the workforce and retention of talent. If people believe that their own leadership skills are being developed, and that they belong to a firm where they are valued and their opinion matters, they are much less likely to go elsewhere.

The alternative puts firms at risk of not having leaders who are prepared for the future. This is not a problem that can be solved by simply hiring outside the firm. Unlike the corporate world, law firm leaders cannot be brought in from the outside to lead a lawyer partnership. They must be home-grown. They must be steeped in firm culture, yet respected enough to take the helm of the firm. The solution is to build a culture in a firm that encourages and rewards the development of leadership skills. Organizations that do so will thrive. 