

THE LEADERSHIP CONUNDRUM

Simon Sinek may have said it best when he surmised during his 2014 Ted Talk “In the military, they give medals to people who are willing to sacrifice themselves so that others may gain. In business, we give bonuses to people who are willing to sacrifice others so that we may gain.” While that might not paint a perfectly accurate picture of leadership in all law firms, it strikes a nerve.

Consider how you define and reward leadership in your firm. Leaders are frequently rewarded financially based on the amount they can bill, or the value of the clients they originate. Other leaders are rewarded based on the success of the team or practice group. Sadly, Leaders are too often put in the position of having to choose between team success or personal success. We task our leaders with the impossible. Build a successful team. Have trust. Be a great communicator. Bill 2100 hours a year AND make enough rain to insure that your entire team meets their annual billable requirement. Who do your leaders feed first? If there is billable work to be had – do they pass it to their team so they can be successful, or do they keep it for themselves so they can enjoy the personal success? The answer to that question will help you to determine whether you have genuine leaders.

Leadership is a tricky thing, and we see firms every day making leadership decisions based on tenure, experience, and the appearance of authority – not because a person actually possesses leadership traits, but rather, because they want to “be in charge.” Experts in the area of leadership suggest that people are good leaders when they make a conscious decision to sacrifice themselves for the good of their team, or people. These experts use terms like clarity, decisiveness, courage, passion, humility, confidence, selflessness, empathy...you will see qualities of leaders described as “Doing what you say. Giving Credit, Taking Blame.”

People are not inherently leaders because they are partners; because they “bought in,” or because they are a subject matter expert in a particular practice area. People are not “leaders” because they are amazing rainmakers, because “clients love them” or they are well spoke or published. Graduating first in your class or being on the Law Review doesn’t matter when it comes to leadership. What matters is one’s ability to create teams of people who trust them, to teach, to mentor, to hear, to adjust, to change, to support. It is about someone’s ability to share a vision and to get others to want to follow and support them.

It is also important that you do not let your “Org Chart” pick de facto leaders. You have to be willing to consider that a less experienced attorney might have extraordinary LEADERSHIP capabilities – and that might mean that they lead a team of people that includes partners and more senior associates. Step away from the Org Chart and make your leadership decisions based on leadership qualities, not tenure.

Determine whether the “leaders” in your organization are successful by ASKING the people they are supposed to be leading how they feel. Do not avoid the question because you are afraid of the answer. If you wonder whether leadership is having a negative impact on your team, look at turnover and read exit interviews. Understand why people have left the firm. According to a March 11, 2013 article by Alan Hall in Forbes magazine, 74% of people would consider finding a new job – and the article points to a study by Accenture that indicates that the reason for their unhappiness is 1) They don’t like their boss (31%), 2) A lack of empowerment (31%), 3) Internal politics (35%) and 4) Lack of recognition (43%). Effective leaders are liked. They empower their teams. They don’t let internal politics drive decisions, and they give credit to their team before themselves.

If you look at the people you have designated as “leaders” in your company and they don’t appear to be sacrificing themselves for the good of their team, it doesn’t mean they are not a valuable, talented, smart, integral part of your firm. It also does not mean they cannot become great leaders. You must INVEST in them and develop their leadership

skills with training and mentoring. We often say “Just because you can play does not mean you can coach.” Firms tend to pick their best lawyer or best paralegal and put them in a management position with absolutely no training, guidance or mentoring. If you discover that no amount of mentoring or training will improve someone’s leadership skills, you may have to make a tough decision. They are still on the team, they just can’t be the coach.