Law Firm Leadership: A Simple Definition for Great Leadership

By Michael D. Short on September 18, 2012

Leadership experts will forever opine on the key characteristics or qualities of a great leader, as if chasing a finite, homogeneous list that can neatly fit all organizations. While I think the pursuit of such lists is interesting, and occasionally fruitful when it produces a new trait that makes one think twice, I find the general exercise futile because the details of the list change from organization to organization and within any given organization over time.

I am more impressed by a concise description of the role and its importance, and I recently heard one that caused me to pause and smile. "A great leader is one who makes people feel safe" is what I was told recently, with a verbal emphasis added to the last word. The impassioned speaker was talking about national politics but I did with this comment what I always do – I tried to apply it to law firms.

The ability to attract and retain key people is vital to any law firm's success, and requires each of them to view the situation as being sufficiently "safe", or perhaps "safer", in relation to what's most important for the individual AND other options in the marketplace. Where a group of lawyers with common perspectives on "safe" choose to practice together, a law firm emerges.

Why would a good and valuable lawyer move a practice from one law firm to another? Better or more predictable cash flow? Confidence in the strategic direction of the firm? The prospect of growing a practice or becoming a better lawyer? It is whatever causes someone to worry and lose sleep at night.

I cannot offer a universal solution to exuding "safe" in law firms. I can, however, think of several strong firmwide leaders (in my estimation) and offer some common themes from their regular communications – a compelling vision for the future of the firm; roles, personal development, and compensation; a general understanding of the types of risks the firm is willing to undertake; and a culture of teamwork and accountability.

Good luck in defining "safe" for your firm, practice group, industry team, office, and staff. It's a worthwhile exercise…if you want your people to stay.

As for the source of this concise and effective observation, I thank my 12 year old daughter. Sometimes we adults cannot see beautiful simplicity in complex topics.