Law Firm Leadership for Business Professionals

By Silvia L. Coulter on December 16, 2020

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Many business professionals seek the role of leader. As we know, there are many more not-so-good leaders than there are good leaders. What makes the difference? Think about the leaders in your life. Which characteristics defined a good leader, and which characteristics defined a bad leader? Looking back on all or part of one's career and the leaders experienced along the way will hopefully help you to become a stronger leader. Here are some tips:

Stay true to your words. If honesty and integrity (for example) are important, you must also be honest and have high integrity. This means doing the right thing all the time and standing by what is best for your team and not a favored individual. When people see you are true to your ideal, they will have high respect and trust for you. Model the behaviors you want to see in others.

Tell the truth. If you mess up, you mess up—plain and simple. Admitting you were not entirely truthful in a given situation (e.g., covering up, trying to help someone) is a sign of courage. Or if you made a mistake, admit it and don't blame someone else. If your team member makes a mistake, use it as a learning opportunity. Someone will know you were not truthful, or covered up, or blamed someone else if you did so, and it's rarely forgotten. Always take the high road.

Build constructive behaviors. Help people see their potential. Be happy for them and not jealous. When people feel supported, people will support their leader. And they are motivated to do their very best. When they feel otherwise (micro-managed, not given credit for their work, corrected for no reason), they will wither and leave. Constructive behaviors include feedback—positive and negative (but negative with suggestions for growth); recognition among others; support (have their back, so-to-speak).

Trust others. Trusting people on your team is essential. There are always two sides to a story, and we are in an environment that finds fault far more often than provides kudos. Embrace people and show them trust. They will produce good work and be inspired by your leadership.

Make the tough decisions. Making tough decisions is not easy. However, not making them will hurt any leader's effectiveness since others will always be watching. While praise and recognition for a job well done are important, waiting too long to deal with an issue on the team will take away a lot of credibility. Do what's right for the team. In the long run, it will always be the best for you and the team. This includes acting quickly when someone is trying to hurt members of the team or you. Bad behavior cannot be allowed.

Develop your skills. The firm is not going to necessarily pay for its business professionals to improve their leadership skills. They may, but if not, don't hold back. Invest in yourself and your future. To be a good, strong leader, find assessments, take leadership development programs (from industry) and read books written to help you to focus on becoming better. And then develop a leadership growth plan to stay on track. When you practice new skills, you become a stronger leader and take the next step in your career.

Help others develop their skills. As part of the team's review, identify one or two areas each member may want to develop

to grow and become stronger at their skills and career. Helping team members be their best will help leaders build credibility among the team and help build their trust and loyalty.

Communicate the plan. Good leaders are people who build bridges and are strong liaisons between top management and their team. Bridging team responsibilities and goals and the department's overall plan to overall firm goals and strategies are key. Otherwise, people may not see how important their role is to the big picture. Remember the NASA floor sweeper when asked by President Kennedy what his job was? The man proudly answered, "I'm helping to put a man on the moon." Leaders help to connect the dots, and this is especially important in a professional services environment.

Celebrate successes! Everyone loves recognition. In fact, recognition often scores higher than salary on many employees' top ten lists. Recognition of jobs well done helps build the constructive styles of team behavior. Good work makes strong leaders look stronger. Recognizing team members within the team and to firm leadership is a sign of a good leader.