

Law Firm Leadership: Living the Values of Greatness

By [Silvia L. Coulter](#) on September 24, 2020

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Many law firm professionals aspire to be leaders at either the practice, department, office, or firm level. As we know, there are more not-so-great leaders than there are great leaders. In today's quickly-changing world facilitated, where the pace of change has been further accelerated by COVID-19 and social unrest, clients are calling on law firm leaders to live up to their espoused values. Specifically, how are you treating the staff? How are you communicating with your clients? What messages are you underscoring for partners, associates, and support teams? How are you upholding the values you say are important? Are you negatively impacting people's lives by laying them off only to save money for partners? These are all questions many general counsels have asked. The most recent may be heard on both Thomson Reuters' and Financial Times' virtual meetings.

Are you a good leader, or are you a great leader? What makes the difference? Think about the leaders in your life. Which characteristics do you believe define a great leader, and which characteristics define a bad leader? Looking back on one's career and the leaders experienced along the way will hopefully help you to become a stronger leader.

Here are some tips I'd like to share with you, which are derived from the great law firm leaders I have had the opportunity to see in action over the course of my career:

- **Stay true to your words.** If honesty and integrity (for example) are important, then 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.
- **Tell the truth.** If you make a mistake, admit it—plain and simple. Admitting you were not entirely truthful or made the wrong decision in a given situation (e.g., covering up, trying to help someone) is a sign of courage. Someone will know you were not truthful, and it is rarely forgotten.
- **Build constructive behaviors.** Help people see their potential. Be happy for them and not jealous. Do not favor others who may be self-motivated and not out for the best interests of the firm. When people feel supported, people will support their leader. And, they are motivated to do their very best. When they think otherwise (micro-managed, not given credit for their work, corrected for no reason, passed over for opportunities, etc.), they will wither and leave. Constructive behaviors include feedback—positive and negative (but negative should include suggestions for growth), recognition among others, and support (have their back so-to-speak). Give kudos to lawyers and staff.
- **Trust others.** Trusting people on your team is essential—lawyers and professional business staff. 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 inspired by your leadership.
- **Make the tough decisions.** Making tough decisions is not easy. 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 is right for the team. In the long run, it will always be the best path for you and the firm. 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 professionals to improve their leadership skills. They may, but if not, do not hold back. Invest in yourself and your future. To be a great leader, find assessments, take leadership development programs (from industry), and read books, which will help you to focus on becoming better. And then develop a leadership growth plan to stay on track. When you practice new skills is when 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 skill and career. Helping team members be their best is going to help leaders build credibility among the team and will 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 overall plan for the department to overall firm goals and strategies are key. Otherwise, people may not see how important their role is in 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 law firm environment. Everyone needs to know the game plan and that they matter.
- **Celebrate successes!** Everyone loves recognition. Recognition often scores higher than salary on many lawyers’ and 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 firm members is the sign of a good leader. It is often been said, “It’s easy being a good leader when things are going well.” Today’s challenges require strong leadership.

About the Author: Silvia Coulter is a Co-founding Principal of LawVision Group. Silvia Coulter is widely regarded as one of the legal industry’s most experienced business development and leadership consultants. Her experience includes working as a former strategic account executive and sales leader at a Fortune 50 company, a chief marketing and business development officer at two global law firms, and consultant and facilitator to professional services firms across the globe. She was an Adjunct Professor at George Washington University’s College of Professional Studies in the Master’s in Law Firm Management program (2010-2019), a co-founder of the Legal Sales and Service Organization (www.legalsales.org), a Past Elected President of the Legal Marketing Association and an elected Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management. She is a frequent speaker and facilitator at professional service firm retreats and legal industry meetings. Silvia is the co-author of three books: The Woman Lawyer’s Rainmaking Game, Rainmaking Advantage, and SAM-Legal: From Key Clients to Strategic Accounts (due out Summer 2020).