

Lessons in Leadership from Commencement Season...

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on May 17, 2017

"A leader's greatest challenge is not leading – it is making others great."

Juan Carlos Varela, President of Panama, May 6th, 2017

The words above were from [President Varela's](#) commencement address at Georgia Tech last weekend, given to this year's undergraduate class from his own alma mater. They just as easily could have been directed to the leadership of most law firms, as a reminder of what is truly important. If the leaders of more firms, practices and other teams took this simple lesson to heart, more firms would achieve the success they constantly seek.

Consider how we select for most leadership roles at law firms. First, and before anyone really has a shot at *any* leadership post, they must prove themselves as a "good (or great) lawyer" and most likely to some degree as a business developer as well. After that, most firms will start to look at who might have some "leadership" or "management" talent, and maybe appoint them to Practice Group Leader roles, or to a committee, or some other place where they might develop some management experience. Along the way, they may or may not be offered some form of leadership development or management training, but much of that is focused on the mechanics of the job, or on leadership styles, communication and similar skills building efforts. Some firm "leaders" don't even get that – they get themselves into leaderships roles through the power of money. As major business generators, they feel entitled to the role and can corral the votes to get what they want.

But where in all of this are we focusing on the attitudes that make leaders great? What President Varela was talking about was not so much skills (although plenty of those are involved in his leadership challenge) but more about attitude and mindset. How many practice group leaders, for example, view their *primary role* as making every member of their group as good and successful as they can be? Probably not too many. Most focus on the tasks of keeping the group running and, if the firm is lucky, managing the economics of performance while making sure younger lawyers are getting good assignments and appropriate training. Maybe we even get so far as some team marketing efforts and a well-considered business plan. But making every lawyer in the group great? Out of scope for most, and probably not even on the radar screen. Scale that up to the firm level, and you have leaders focused on strategy, revenue, profitability and performance – all critical items, to be sure – but rarely on the single greatest challenge of leadership: making others great. That is, usually, left to the individual, to do as best as they can. Some achieve astonishing success, and others fall woefully short, but far too many end up doing "OK." Good, perhaps, but something short of what their potential might have allowed.

What might happen if every leader in a law firm took President Varela's words to heart and focused their greatest efforts on making sure everyone in their firm achieved the greatness that was their potential? What levels of teamwork and performance might *that* firm achieve? I look forward to the opportunity to get to know *that* firm.