

## Reality Bites: How a Dose of Reality Can Help Law Firm Leaders Drive Firms Forward

By [LawVision](#) on December 3, 2013

In a recent blog post, Dr. Larry Richards discussed in depth the prevalence of “[learned helplessness](#)” among lawyers. A phenomenon first discovered by psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman, learned helplessness manifests itself as an inability to act in the face of adverse conditions. Individuals, after experiencing repeated failure, learn to accept and expect failure. This widespread psychological phenomenon poses a particularly daunting challenge for today’s law firm leaders. In an industry characterized by rapid change and intense competition, how can leadership thwart this debilitating thinking and motivate lawyers to move forward?

During a recent leadership meeting, a Managing Partner asked each of his Practice Group Heads how current market pressures were impacting their groups. In succession, each of the first seven indicated market conditions were poor and spoke pessimistically of prospects for the coming months. “There just isn’t any work,” they said, “It’s a down market and the economy is killing us.” Unfortunately, the numbers supported these characterizations. Revenue was nearly flat for every group and the firm was struggling to grow.

After listening to his leaders, the Managing Partner turned to the final group head. She stirred. “The market has completely changed,” she said. “My clients don’t want their cases to go on for years. They are watching the bottom line and looking for faster resolution. There are more settlements. What we’ve done in the past isn’t working. We need to do something differently.” The Managing Partner smiled.

Unlike her cohorts who put on a brave face and crafted stories in keeping with how they wanted to be perceived, she had taken a bold step. She had acknowledged reality, supported it with facts and, to her credit, even accepted responsibility for changing the fate of her practice. This example demonstrates reality-based leadership.

Reality-based leadership is the antidote to learned helplessness. And reality-based leadership demands, well, a reality. An unbiased perspective on what is going on in, around and outside of the firm. Before becoming reality-based leaders, leaders must first define and understand their own reality.

The best-run firms have well-developed strategic functions that regularly gather, synthesize and analyze data to help form this reality for their leaders. Though in its nascent stages at many law firms, this function will continue to grow, thrive and lend competitive advantage. The key activities to help build a reality baseline for your firm include:

1. Tracking market trends
2. Following clients on LinkedIn and Twitter
3. Engaging in regular, non-case-specific dialogue with clients
4. Soliciting systematic client feedback
5. Having substantive conversation with fellow partners

6. Benchmarking performance against competitors
7. Routinely gathering –and giving – employee feedback

p.s. For those of you interested in the behavioral components of reality-based leadership, Cy Wakeman offers great perspectives including this one in her Forbes piece "[It's Time to Rethink Employee Engagement.](#)"