

COMMENTARY

Law Firm Leadership Isn't a Role, It's a Mindset

Firm leaders from Cleary Gottlieb say when a law firm does not subscribe to a traditional corporate structure, firms should encourage leadership from everybody, including partners, associates, and professional staff.

By Michael A. Gerstenzang and Hy Pomerance

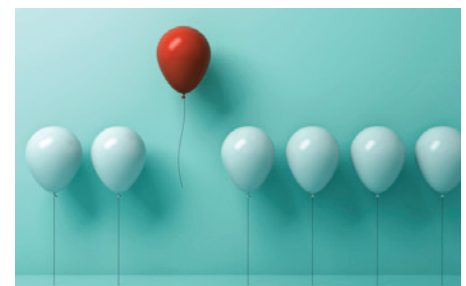
At most companies, the leadership structure is typically clear and hierarchical. But what does leadership look like at a law firm when a traditional corporate structure doesn't apply?

The short answer is that firms should expect and encourage leadership from *everybody* - partners, associates, professional staff - and leadership needs to be a firm-wide mindset that's aligned with both culture and business strategy.

Leadership in a flatter, more project-oriented law firm context can't be one partner asserting authority over others in a static bureaucratic or hierarchical structure. Instead, a distributed leadership model

should be built into how a firm operates and how lawyers and staff work with each other. When everyone is given the opportunity to learn and demonstrate leadership, it allows them to take full responsibility for moving the firm forward, creates an overall environment in which the default is to support colleagues, and makes it easier to always put the clients' needs at the center of decision-making.

As a recent *American Lawyer* article discussed, leadership should be about developing and empowering "change-makers". These are lawyers and staff who understand that firms need to be open to constant adjustments in thinking and processes,



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who recognise that there are complex hurdles to implementing changes in a partnership structure, and who are able to build trust with clients and encourage cooperation among their colleagues. To be certain, they are focused on financial performance, but also recognise that long-term success requires more than just that.

This kind of consistent change can and must come from all corners and seniority levels of a firm, and it should drive lawyers to view

leadership as an important skill to develop in a manner that positions the whole firm to excel.

When leadership becomes one of a firm's core values, it can be developed in a variety of contexts, including practice group leadership, client team leadership, committee leadership and talent development. Making sure there are opportunities to develop leadership skills within these key areas of firm operations will bring out the best in your lawyers - and help them deliver the best performance for clients.

Practice groups

Leadership in practice groups requires a willingness to anticipate and understand market shifts, and to creatively think about how to address those shifts. The ability to form and frequently reconfigure groups to respond to changes in clients' business sectors is essential to success.

This type of adaptability may lead to a different approach to practice groups—instead of forming groups around a particular area of law, groups should have the flexibility to

focus on a geographic market, industry sector, or trend. The success of these groups requires close, multidisciplinary collaboration, which will only happen if leaders mobilise resources in pursuit of greater coordination.

Just as importantly, junior lawyers within practice groups who experience this sort of responsive and dynamic approach will learn to approach their own practices this way - setting them up to lead future groups that are built for positive change.

Client teams

Client teams, regardless of size, are successful when team members are engaged, motivated, and committed to the development of a deep, long-term client relationship. Rather than one person taking proprietary "ownership" of the client, client-focused leaders should involve team members with different skills and areas of focus to build and reinforce the relationship. This requires leaders who understand and anticipate the client's needs, while simultaneously understanding the team's own strengths (and weaknesses).

Often, this means carving out time to stay in close contact with the client and the members of the team who have active engagements with the client - and, by doing so, establishing relationships of trust and loyalty with both. Colleagues who bring distinct value to the client aren't threatening a leader's position - they're expanding it in the short term and making sure there are people in place to carry the client relationship into the long term.

Firm committees

Firm leadership also means having lawyers who are engaged with firm management and business operations, typically via committees. These committees present an important opportunity to collaborate with professional staff - and to learn when strong leadership means letting someone else have a hand on the wheel.

Senior professionals are leaderstoo, and lawyers should learn to value, recognise and welcome their contributions to the firm's objectives. Committees should also work to ensure that diverse views are represented, and are *heard*,

throughout the decision-making processes; doing so improves the quality of the decisions and the results those decisions deliver.

Participating on firm committees can present a variety of challenges, among the most significant being the need for an effective decision-making process and a structure that ensures follow-through when decisions are made. Effective leaders will develop an understanding of how and when to empower senior professional staff to be key partners in these areas.

Talent development

Developing and managing a firm's talent is imperative to long-term success, and it includes actively developing leadership skills in associates. While it's necessary to emphasise substantive development of legal skills as younger lawyers advance, it is also vital to help them learn and practice the "soft skills" that will help them become leaders.

Skills like communication, flexibility, and team and project management will be vital throughout their careers.

Expressly and consistently evaluating leadership skills should be integral parts of the associate evaluation and promotion processes. If lawyers get regular opportunities to practise leadership throughout their time as associates, each year's potential partner class will be filled with people who are ready to assume increasing levels of leadership responsibility.

When leadership skill development is integrated into all of these contexts, each part of the firm's practice and management is set up to encourage and incorporate positive change. A dynamic firm will allow every lawyer and staff member the opportunity to influence change and should not shy away from the chance to do so. Change-makers are focused on client development and revenue generation, to be sure, but they also leverage their skills to promote collaboration and engagement, encouraging others to clearly understand and buy into the firm's goals. They set an example that becomes a firm-wide mindset and a culture of perpetually creating and developing leaders.

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