

# Definitely Mabey

## Law firm style leadership... same bus, different seat

By Stephen Mabey, CA

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***The art of leadership (not a science for sure) continues to be a well-documented topic across all industry segments, but like most critical success factors there is no cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all answer. The leadership traits***

***required to successfully lead a mechanized, goods-oriented entity are different in certain aspects than those required in a professional service industry.***

While different folks will point to different challenges that are causing firms to implode, stagnate, or at least not progress, I believe it is as simple as a lack of commitment to the firm's direction. In the book *When Professionals Have to Lead: A New Model for High Performance*, the authors Thomas J. Delong, John J. Gabarro, and Robert J. Lees articulate it best by pointing out that:

*“Professionals have an innate need to be involved and included. They want to be heard. Unfortunately, a sense of alienation exists among firm professionals at all levels who feel the firm has changed and that the current culture and leadership has left them out; many solid performers who are not the star players at a firm often feel as if their contributions are being undervalued.*

*When professionals feel excluded—or that no efforts are made to solicit their ideas and objections—they feel alienated and fail to focus on the task at hand. Many will pull away from other professionals and become cynical. Over time, some professionals may actually sabotage firm goals if they do not feel committed to the desired outcomes. Gaining commitment increases the odds that people will work harder and more creatively to move a firm, practice, or project in the desired direction. In the face of increased financial frustration on the part of*

*lawyers, unmet needs, lack of shared vision, jadedness with what they do, and general poor morale finding the right leadership style for a firm has taken on increased significance.”*

The style of leadership that will be most successful will depend on the environment in which the leading is being attempted. There are numerous leadership styles and variations that have been identified or labeled in modern literature with six of the more prominent ones being:

1. **Situational:** seen to be extremely flexible whose practitioners are constantly tweaking and making adjustments to meet current circumstances;
2. **Participative:** continuous seeker of consensus which can cause some confusion as to who is leading and who is following;
3. **Transactional:** intuitive negotiator who places heavy emphasis on the “you scratch my back and I will scratch yours” approach to leading;
4. **Charismatic:** leadership based on the strength of their personality, not necessarily the strength of their ideas;
5. **Servant:** leadership based on empowering others to take on increasingly visible and important roles; and
6. **Transformational:** leadership based on the strength of their ideas or vision and their belief of the possibility of the impossible.

There are five leadership traits critical to folks trying to provide leadership at any level in a law firm: board/management committee, standing committee, practice group, office, administrative department, etc:

1. **Firm-first mentality:** law firm leaders must have the trust of the partners that they will always put the interest of the firm/practice/department ahead of personal gain or interest of the few;
2. **Understanding the motivation of others (empathy):** able to push/motivate people to

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want to take on challenges, push personal and practice boundaries, and thereby create new opportunities for the firm and themselves by understanding emotional buttons and hitting the right ones;

3. **Receptacle for new/different ideas and approaches:** balances self-opinion with the ideas of others, irrespective of origination and quality;
4. **Personal capital (credibility):** most changes in law firms involve some degree of infringement of individual autonomy and it is critical that the person is seen to have credibility when arguing on behalf of the change, whether it is having a real grasp of the impact of the change, the ability to ensure the proper execution, or the necessity to make the change; and
5. **Communicator:** without strong, interpersonal verbalization skills it becomes almost impossible to create the desired collaborative environment—while not shying away from confrontation when absolutely necessary, by being prepared to conduct “walk around” conversations, confrontation is minimized.

Given the critical leadership traits identified, a “subservient leadership” style would seem to have the greatest odds of achieving success in today's law firms, particularly for addressing engagement. This is a hybrid of the “servant leadership” model with the thrust being that leaders adopting this model lead from behind by shying away from the limelight and empowering others to be seen at the forefront.

Successful subservient leadership requires a healthy dose of Machiavellian attitude as the importance of executing on the vision or plan has to clearly outweigh the need for recognition of one's efforts or ideas: “I don't care who takes

credit as long as we get done what must be done.”

Some of the benefits of such a leadership style that should resonate with law firms include:

- The exemplary treatment of lawyers and staff leads to an excellent treatment of clients by lawyers and staff of the firm and a high loyalty of the clients;
- There is high lawyer and staff identification with the enterprise;
- An excellent firm culture is developed; and
- Leaders of the firm define themselves by their significance to the people.

Remember as former U.S. president Ronald Reagan is attributed as having once said:

***“The greatest leader is not the one who does the greatest things. The greatest leader is the one who gets the people to do the greatest things.”***



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