To be successful, all law firms need to be well managed. The functions and responsibilities of a managing partner or an executive management committee derive not only from the structures and policies of the firm, but should be based on sound business principles. However, effective management is not enough. To achieve significant sustainable growth, a firm also requires leadership.

The distinction between management and leadership is not always appreciated. After all, a good manager needs to demonstrate sound qualities of leadership. It has been said that management means doing things right, while leadership means doing the right things.

Management's role is to implement, improve and optimise the systems, structures and processes of the firm. The focus is on productivity, efficiency and cost-effectiveness. This involves elements of supervision, administration, coordination and monitoring of performance. Investigating, evaluating and making recommendations on anticipated needs are an important management function. Oversight of financial matters, career development, compliance and innumerable other tasks all land on the manager's desk (to the undoubted relief of the non-managing partners).

It is not surprising that the role of leadership is often obliterated in the daily clamour of crisis management and cascading deadlines. But even the smallest firm will benefit from recognising the critical need for a leadership role, separate from the management function.

Some law firms have successfully opted to appoint non-lawyer management on the premise that a commercial graduate with an MBA, for example, is better qualified and trained for financial and business management than an attorney. But for effective leadership, evidence suggests that without a proven background in the profession, it is difficult for a non-lawyer to win the loyalty and buy-in of other lawyers in the firm.

The three most common attributes of a successful leader are consistently shown to be:

- **Trust**: So much depends on the relationships established by a leader – not only between the leader and the wider firm, but the degree of trust within the firm and between team members. Trust will flourish where a leader is decisive, communicative and ethical.
- **Emotional engagement**: A leader must have genuine care and concern for every individual, a belief in their worth and role in the mission of the firm. This emotional intelligence is the key to gaining respect and instilling confidence.
- **Competence**: Leaders often have to give direction to highly intelligent, skilled and talented people, some of whom may reject the notion that they need any leadership at all. For this reason, only a leader who has earned credibility through performance, and demonstrated the acumen and qualities required for leadership, is likely to be recognised by the sceptics as having the credentials to take the leadership reins. The leader’s skills must combine judgment, timing and vision. Not everyone is a natural leader, but many become highly competent leaders through experience, selfless dedication and moral authority.

Whereas management operates within the firm, the focus of leadership extends beyond that. A leader must be able to take an overview of the direction of the firm, understand where it is best positioned in the market, and both develop and represent the character and brand of the firm. The aim is to create an environment where the team embraces a shared goal, and takes ownership of a collective sense of purpose.

Leadership is a continuous process. It should construct a long-term platform on which the firm can build its plans, aspirations and values that align with the marketplace of the future and are relevant to each and every employee. This road map provides a context for decision making.

There are many positive consequences which flow from a leader-driven vision. Individuals are motivated and even inspired by the attributes valued by the firm, such as innovation and knowledge. The impetus to strive to achieve clearly identified, desirable goals leads to significantly higher levels of job satisfaction, loyalty, pride and productivity.

A secondary, but equally important, benefit of bold leadership is that a habit of leadership is established. Potential future leaders take their cue from the top. A succession ladder is created. Authority can confidently be delegated. Change and reform are not feared but embraced.

Fundamental to sound leadership is a good dose of realism. The way to success is littered with obstacles. Many firms doubt whether they can even survive, let alone prosper. A mature, thoughtful assessment of the firm’s strengths and weaknesses, a focus on satisfying the needs of clients, and the setting of re-

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alistic and achievable goals that remain flexible enough to allow for change, can generate the enthusiasm and determination needed for success. Statesmanlike emphasis on mutual support, generosity of spirit and putting the welfare of the team above selfish interests is not only a rewarding and personally satisfying way to behave – but infuses that critical element – an ethos of service leadership. That is why emotional engagement by leaders is so important. If negative baggage, bad attitudes and small-mindedness can be dealt with and put to rest, the collective intellectual, physical and emotional energy of everyone in the firm is able to be harnessed constructively. With that comes growing self-assurance and fulfilment in the competitive endeavour.

There are a number of distinctive leadership styles that have been identified. Each can be successful to a greater or lesser degree in the right context.

The coercive style
This is the domineering style of the master and commander. It demands immediate compliance. It is a top-down inflexible approach. This approach can be effective in breaking failed business habits and shock people into new ways of working. It is often appropriate in a genuine emergency. It is militaristic. Orders are barked and must be obeyed, but once the crisis has eased, if this dissonant style continues, it will crush the spirit and feelings of those affected. This style permits no individual initiative. It leads to a loss of motivation and pride in performance. The ‘big boss’ syndrome can morph into a dictatorship with the leader perceived as a despot; a bully who tolerates no other views or input. People feel disrespected and their sense of responsibility and loyalty evaporates.

A sub-species of the coercive style is management by embarrassment. This is a process of naming and shaming employees who get it wrong in some way, humiliating them before everyone else. This cracking of the whip seeks to intimidate employees into compliance by fear. Needless to say, this climate of oppression kills loyalty, pride and initiative stone dead. It is not leadership at all.

The affiliative style
When clear direction is needed, this authoritative style acts as a change catalyst, mobilising people towards a fresh vision. Characteristic of this style is vibrant enthusiasm, empathy and the ability to connect and articulate a strategic vision. Visionary leadership maximises commitment to the firm’s goals and strategies. Standards are defined as they revolve around that vision, but people are given the freedom to innovate, experiment and take calculated risks. People who work for such leaders understand that what they do matters and why.

The distributive style
This permission-based style of leadership values people and their emotions more than tasks and goals. By building strong emotional bonds, there is a positive effect on communication and trust. Loyalty improves and so does flexibility because the affiliative leader gives people the freedom to do their job in the way they think is most effective.

This bonding approach creates a sense of belonging. It is most effective when trying to build team harmony, improve communication or repair broken trust. The leader is also not afraid to openly express his or her own emotions. However, an exclusive focus on praise can allow poor performance to go uncorrected. When people need clear directives to navigate through complex challenges, the caring, nurturing approach can leave them adrift.

The democratic style
This is where the leader asks for ideas and seeks consensus on the way forward. This consultative process aids buy-in through participation. It builds trust, respect and commitment. By listening to employees’ concerns, the democratic leader learns what to do to raise morale. This style can generate fresh ideas, but if consensus is not achieved, divisions may become entrenched. This process can get bogged down in endless meetings. There are two sub-species of this democratic style:
- The distributive style. Leadership is shared and spread throughout the firm, but this can be effective only with constant coordination and communication to avoid a free-for-all where momentum is dissipated and focus is lost. Silos can form where individuals or groups operate in isolation from, and even in competition with, others in the firm. Dispersing leadership may dilute the sense of direction of the firm.
- The collective style. This form of political leadership is unlikely to succeed in business or the professions because no individual ultimately takes responsibility or can be held personally accountable. All forms of leadership ultimately require someone to be in charge. Decision-making also becomes cumbersome and time-consuming. Communication from various groupings or persons making up the collective leadership can be contradictory and uncoordinated. Consensus, which is agreement by compromise, is a good way to develop policy, but seldom a template for dynamic leadership.

The pacesetting style
The leader sets extremely high performance standards and exemplifies them. This demanding style can place undue pressure on employees. Flexibility evaporates and people feel the pacesetter does not trust them to work in their own way. There is little understanding of how each person’s work fits into the big picture. Setting an example is a good approach, but really works only when everyone is self-motivated, highly competent and needs little direction or coordination.

Leading from the front can leave the leader isolated. It is usually a better option for the leader to marshal his or her troops and let the frontrunners, in terms of performance, crack on at their pace, secure in the knowledge that they have the team behind them, and that everyone understand his or her role. A good leader will also ensure that attention is given to the stragglers to up their pace.

The coaching style
Here the leader acts more like a counselor and mentor than a traditional boss. Employees are encouraged to establish long-term career goals and raise performance, but, teaching people and helping them grow is a time-consuming and tedious process that requires constant dialogue. Results of this style can be patchy. Self-starting independent-minded employees often do not respond well to a coaching style. Other employees appreciate the confidence shown in them and react whole-heartedly.

Effective leaders are intuitively able to switch from one leadership style to another. They have the nimbleness to apply their competencies in building relationships and communication to achieve maximum influence. The most successful leadership style is a seamless combination of styles which allows for the agility to operate on a number of levels with different individuals and groupings.

Good leadership creates good firms, and good firms outlast their leaders. That is why the best leaders pass on the baton before any cult of personality develops.

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