

BEYOND AUTHORITY; LEADERSHIP IN A CHANGING WORLD

In the field of law, partnership business models are rife – talented, skillful individuals who work together and earn success for their business. But, with a distinct lack of formal reporting structures like those that occur within ‘corporates’, leading and leadership in these partnerships is often missing. Partners value their autonomy, but where there is a lack of leadership, there is often sub-optimal performance!

In our experience, the lack of leadership can be embedded deep in the psyche of most partners. Even senior partners who are clearly in leadership positions – such as a Practice Area Head – sometimes won’t acknowledge they are leaders; the most they will accept is that they are “taking the lead”. I suspect that this reluctance to lead is due to a number of factors, including:

- The mis-guided belief that any non-fee earning activities don’t add value and are an unhelpful distraction.
- The lack of leadership training that many senior partners have had.
- That, in the absence of a clear “command and control” structure, leading is hard.

The first objection has been widely dis-proved and the second can be easily fixed, if the partners see the value. However, the third objection remains.

We recently met one of the founders of the charity Common Purpose (<http://commonpurpose.org/>), that seeks to help individuals lead beyond their authority

for the benefit of their organisations and society. They have developed a model of leadership that we think can be helpful to partners, as set out in the book by Julia Middleton – “Beyond Authority; leadership in a changing world.”

The key to making things happen is that individuals have to rely on their capacity to persuade and their ability to form networks and coalitions. In this regard, persuasion is not about the quality of your argument or IQ, but about how you connect with an individual’s hopes and fears and their desire to be involved in something that has meaning and purpose, not just that it “pays the bills”.

Middleton argues that three key competencies are required to lead beyond authority:

1. The right approach
2. A good strategic mind-set
3. The ability to work with people.

We’ve looked at each of these in turn:

THE RIGHT APPROACH

- **Courage** – stepping into the unknown requires “sensible” courage. We must be aware of what we don't know and listen carefully to feedback. Courage is underpinned by resilience, which ensures that leaders can cope when things get tough.
- **Independence** – this is a state of mind. In this context, independence means not being in it for yourself, but rather the greater good of the firm. If others see that you are solely in it for yourself, your legitimacy can become eroded. That's why you need to demonstrate the humility of a level 5 leader (Jim Collins).
- **Passion** – this is often your greatest resource when trying to get things done in a partnership. However, make sure that your passion is appropriate to the situation; conservative partnership cultures can sometimes reject those who are over passionate!

STRATEGIC MINDSET

- **Strategic thinking** – this is about understanding the system that you are seeking to influence. Partnerships are, in effect, a series of micro systems, and it's your job to understand them all. How do the litigators compare to the corporate team? What about tax and the consultants? Or even, what about that boutique acquisition that you made a year ago?
- **Building coalitions** – this is essential to success as they contribute advice, tell you where you are going wrong, prepare the way for change and enlist others. The hard part in partnerships is that coalitions are not about consensus. To build consensus you have to believe in teams and the power that they can bring. This is not about a zero-sum game, it's about making the pie bigger so that everyone wins.
- **Timing** – leaders need to judge timing, and not go too fast or too slow. In partnerships this can mean playing the long game (things can go at a glacial pace) and not dooming yourself to failure by pushing for a quick decision. At the same time, you need to be ready to act at a moment's notice when the conditions are right.

PEOPLE

- **Interest in people** – are you genuinely interested in people? Not individuals, but people generally. You can't fake this, others experience you as genuine or they don't. This interest gives you integrity and authenticity. When you are with people, do you make them feel like the most important person in the world – like Bill Clinton famously did?
- **Networks** – in order to lead beyond authority, you need to be well connected. Not superficially, just met once kind of connection, but one of real relationships. This takes time and energy and will often involve you doing something for the other person first – making those deposits in their emotional bank account.

How do you compare to these criteria? What are the areas where you know you can do better? Remember, in these increasingly competitive times, your partnership needs you to step up and lead. What will your first step be?



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