



LEGAL PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Practice Innovations: Leadership insight from law firm leaders

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As the pandemic forced many law firms to change numerous aspects of their operations, firm management was critical to whether this process was successful or not

The legal industry has seen a lot of changes to the way law firms operate, and more importantly, how they are managed since 2020. The pandemic forced many firms to change their technology, their processes and procedures, and their expectations related to people, productivity, and performance.

To this end, firm management was critical to their firm surviving and then thriving after the worst of the pandemic crisis had passed. In discussions with firm leaders, I learned good communication was the foundation of effective management over these critical few years. Leaders also had to push their firms to embrace change so the firms could see their way through to today's post-pandemic environment.

I asked a handful of firm leaders to identify their most important communication skills and how they used those to influence others. The majority of the firm leaders to whom I spoke listed *listening* as their number one skill — underscoring that effective leaders know when they should talk and when they need to listen.

The value of listening

Lynn Luther, a member attorney at Eastman & Smith, further recommends “taking the time to listen to those who may not be as boisterous in sharing their opinions.”

Indeed, active listening requires the recipient to listen between the lines because everyone has “different communication styles”, notes **Sherry Leary**, Chief Operating Officer at Morris James, adding that she often “adjusts how I approach communication with [each] individual”, allowing her to communicate more effectively with everyone.

There are several ways you can enhance your active listening skills, such as:

- ***Paying attention to the speaker*** — make eye contact, face the speaker, and avoid distractions.
- ***Listening for the speaker’s main points*** — do not get sidetracked by minor details.
- ***Asking questions to clarify*** — show that you’re paying attention and that you care about what the speaker has to say.
- ***Summarizing what was said*** — check your understanding and make sure that you are on the same page.
- ***Responding appropriately*** — offer support, provide feedback, or simply say thank you.

Active listening is a skill that takes practice. The more you do it, the better at it you’ll become, and the more influence you will have as a leader.

Transparency and clarity, whether oral or written, is at the top of the list as well. For example, speaking openly about firm issues and concerns can build trust among the attorneys and staff. **David Lackowitz**, partner at Moses Singer, says he has found that people “appreciate frank and candid feedback”, and he chooses “honesty and directness even if the conversation is uncomfortable.” It’s no surprise then that Millennials and Gen Z lawyers have been demanding more transparency, which has caused many firm leaders to rethink how much information they are willing to share.

Lourdes Fuentes, CEO of Sanabria & Associates, warns “we must not forget: You have got to communicate the entire message, not just random pieces of it, or the puzzle will never come together.”

There are some areas to consider for improving transparency that can have a positive impact on the firm and its lawyers, such as:

- financial information that impacts the health and future of the firm;
- recruiting goals, including pay structures and hiring processes;
- diversity, equity & inclusion strategic plans;
- competencies expected at each level of practice and for staff positions;
- recipes for success (such as the path to partnership) and other career development strategies; and

- business development initiatives and activities across the firm.

Transparency is important for several reasons. First, it helps to build trust among attorneys, the staff, and the firm. Second, it can help to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts. Third, it can help to ensure that attorneys and staff are treated fairly and that their contributions are valued.

Leading to gain followers

When I asked law firm leaders how they influence others to follow them I repeatedly heard: *Lead by example*. **Calvin “Woody” Fowler**, CEO and chair of Williams Mullen, led his entire firm back to the office in May 2020 “by keeping everyone engaged” and “instilling trust through transparency.” He went to the office every day during the pandemic, ensuring it was one of the safest places to be.

Other leaders endorsed this approach as well. “Don’t ever ask someone else to do something you aren’t prepared to do yourself,” says **Mickey Maher**, managing partner of Hecht Solberg Robinson Goldberg & Bagley, alluding to a sentiment that was echoed by others.

Kristina Feher, managing member of Feher Law, agrees, adding: “It is important for others to see I am not afraid to get in the trenches and do the *lesser* jobs. By seeing that, others can often understand that I am vested and willing to do what it takes to succeed and accomplish the task at hand.”

Another consistent response to how leaders influence others is through *consensus building*, which can often take a lot of time and energy. **Leslie Packer**, managing partner of Ellis Winters, says she embraces consensus building as her primary leadership style. “I influence others not to follow me, but to do what is in the best interest of the firm,” Packer says.

Gary Lesser, managing partner of Lesser, Lesser, Landy & Smith, PLL and current president of the Florida Bar says building consensus gets to “end with the best solution to move forward together.” There are a number of actions that law firms can take to build that trust and encourage consensus building, such as:

- **Hold regular meetings** — provide an opportunity for everyone to share their thoughts and ideas.
- **Encourage open communication** — ensure that everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas.
- **Be willing to compromise** — make certain that everyone is satisfied with the decision.
- **Be respectful of everyone’s opinion** — create a positive and productive work environment.

Consensus building is important in a law firm because it allows everyone to have a say in the decision-making process, which often leads to better decisions.

The insights from this group of leaders would not be complete without a look at how they best implemented change at their firms. For example, one common issue for attorneys is time management, and through leading by example, **Ariana Tadler**, founder and managing partner of Tadler Law, says she “humanized” time management issues by sharing her own struggles and suggesting effective solutions. This encouraged individuals on her team to find and implement new habits for themselves, she adds.

Indeed, embracing transparency and clarity has been a mantra for **Joshua Driskell**, managing partner of Lagerof Lawyers. Driskell explains that he meets regularly with his junior attorneys “to give them a strong voice in the leadership and direction of the firm” and to remind them that they are future firm leaders.

Finally, one of the most difficult roles a leader can assume is supporting team leaders when they have to manage poor performers. Often, many law firms have a hard time terminating attorneys and staff, even if underperforming. Tony Young, executive director of Chambliss, Bahner & Stophel, says he worked step by step with one of his team leaders to replace a poor performer and that now that team is “one of the most productive teams,” and the leader “walks with confidence.”

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