



# IS YOUR FIRM'S LEADERSHIP MODEL SUSTAINABLE?

By Jo Smith

**A**RE you prepared to lose your Managing Partner, COO, a critical practice group leader or a key rainmaker? Tomorrow? You might have excellent leadership in place today, but unless you (1) have a clear and effective leadership model or framework in place, and (2) strategically and consistently develop leadership talent, your firm's future is at risk! Your life's work could crumble in months or days.

A founding partner recently confided that he has trapped himself in his own firm by failing to sufficiently develop replacement leadership talent. His firm and his partners rely on him to bring in the majority of the firm's clients and provide oversight of the firm's operations and largest contracts. As a result, he's unable to extract sufficient value from a sale of the firm and feels morally obligated to his partners to continue working longer, harder hours than he prefers. This could have been avoided.

The following are preliminary questions and answers to consider before examining your leadership framework and development practices:

What is leadership? Leadership is "the art of motivating a group of people to act towards achieving a common goal."

"The leader is the inspiration and director of the action. He or she is the person in the group that possesses the combination of personality and skills that makes others want to follow his or her direction." Susan Ward, About.com Guide

Is leadership innate or learned? Several years ago, the Direc-

tor of the Washington Park Zoo was asked, “When did you first know you were a leader?” “When I was four years old,” she replied. “The neighborhood children were playing at my house and I said to them, ‘I will play my piano and you sing.’ I played my toy piano and they sang. In that moment I knew I was a leader.” At just four years old she had the ability—call it art, skills, or personal charisma—to inspire her friends to follow her direction and enact her vision. Clearly her leadership ability was either innate or learned at a remarkably early age. Early trait theories contended that leadership qualities are innate and that you either have them or you don’t. More recently, however, we’ve come to understand that, while leaders share a number of common traits, leadership can be learned and enhanced. In fact, personality profiles that sometimes identify natural leaders measure the propensity or inclination to lead, not the requisite knowledge and skills. Those can, and must, be learned for effective, sustainable leadership.

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What leadership styles are most effective? Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee in *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, identified six leadership styles: Visionary, Coaching, Affiliative, Democratic, Pacesetter and Commanding. The best leaders, according to these authors, move effortlessly (or so it appears to their observers and followers) between three or four of these styles, depending on current situations. The most positive of the styles – that is, the styles that consistently result in the most positive results – are the Visionary and Coaching styles of leadership. The Visionary style “moves people toward shared dreams,” while the Coaching style

“connects what a person wants with the organization’s goals.” French and Raven’s Five Forms of Power distinguishes between positional power and personal power and favors personal power as the better choice. Personal

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power includes expert power – the power derived from being an expert in your field – and referent power – the power of your personal appeal.

Does your firm need transactional or transformational leadership? The answer is a resounding, “Yes!” to both. Transactional leadership is the work of managers and ensures that the routine work of your firm is done reliably. Transformational leadership is the work of visionaries and ensures that your firm is continuously changing and growing to meet the future. Transactional and transformational leadership are not mutually exclusive and can reside in the same leader or

manager. Your Accounting Manager might tend to be transactional, but also have the visioning and influencing skills to guide his or her team to design and implement new systems. Similarly, your Managing Partner’s most remarkable skills might be envisioning and inspiring new firm directions, but he or she is still responsible for monitoring the firm’s economic performance and financial well-being.

Your Model: Do you have a clear and effective leadership framework in place?

Do you need to formalize or modify your current leadership framework? Are your leadership and management responsibilities distributed along appropriate lines? Are the right people in those roles today? The following

steps will help you formalize or revise your leadership framework:

1. Determine your firm’s guiding principles. Guiding principles should underlie all major decisions of the firm and are critical to the firm’s

culture and continuity. They should be defined by your leadership team and shareholders, preferably with input and participation from others in the firm. Unless you’re a solo practitioner, beware of guiding principles written by a single person – “leader” or not.

2. Communicate your firm’s guiding principles fully and frequently. The communication of guiding principles should originate from the highest level of leadership and be broadcast throughout the firm via your marketing professionals, practice group leaders, and others. Effective leaders at all levels of the organization consistently demonstrate the firm’s guiding principles by word and deed.

3. Design a sustainable leadership framework and plan. Begin your planning sessions with a review of your guiding principles and use them as a reminder or test throughout your planning process. Identify the responsibilities your leadership team must oversee and/or fulfill and the skills each requires. Determine how best to divide those responsibilities among leadership roles. Do you need to redistribute responsibilities? Do you have enough members on your leadership team? Do they have the necessary skills? Do you need to add a COO or CFO? Finalize your plan by including an implementation schedule.

4. Implement your plan. Make leadership adjustments or additions as designated by your plan; add or enhance your firm’s methods of recognizing, evaluating, and developing

leadership talent.

Your Talent: Do you strategically and consistently develop leadership talent?

First you must recognize its potential. Leadership is the ability to influ-

## A formal leadership development process will help you uncover hidden potential.

ence others to act toward a desired end. Leadership does not require authority, but does require followers, as illustrated above by the zoo director's story. Presumably people in your firm, leaders and staff alike, look to your leadership team for advice and guidance, but who do they follow among their peers? These are your naturally emerging leaders and they are worthy of leadership development.

There are at least two reasons, however, why you should not rely exclusively on this method of identifying leadership talent. First, some people volunteer enthusiastically for leadership, but they are more interested in the position than in the good of the firm. If you develop their growth over time, however, you can either reshape their motivation or direct them away from the leadership pipeline. Second, you can miss excellent leadership potential. While natural leaders will emerge (remember that they have the propensity to lead), others who might have excellent leadership potential but are quieter in their style, can be passed over. A formal leadership development process will help you uncover this hidden potential.

"In order for a law firm to be successful, it is paramount that their leaders have a broad range of experience, business development skills, and unrivaled expertise within their field." Chris Fensome, *The Importance of Succession Planning Within a Law Firm*

Your leadership development program, regardless of size or complexity, should monitor and measure technical skills development, key practice,

and leadership experiences, and objective results, as well as leadership skills. The technical skills, experiences, and objectives most critical to your firm's leadership should be clearly defined and must be consistent with your

firm's guiding principles for maximum effectiveness and sustainability.

"Although technical excellence and intellect are critical factors for success as a lawyer, emotional intelligence is the differentiating factor for successful leadership." Center for Creative Leadership, 2003.

Leadership Skills and Emotional Intelligence. The four categories of emotional intelligence (EI), as identified by EI expert Daniel Goleman, are Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness and Relationship Management. Each is made up of a subset of skills, such as self-assessment, political awareness, and conflict management, that can be learned, first from our parents, then in school, the workplace, and the community-at-large.

Accordingly, your firm's development program should improve candidates' emotional intelligence, as well as their technical expertise. Developmental opportunities can be provided and monitored by a combination of mentoring, supervising, coaching, and training.

- Mentoring requires the technical expertise being transferred. That is to say that a mentor to an attorney should be a more experienced attorney. A mentor should, in addi-

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tion to having the requisite technical knowledge, have the ability to advise and teach, and the desire to

positively impact his or her mentee's career. People with neither the interest nor the skill should not be required to mentor.

- Supervising requires the ability to delegate effectively, with the purpose of (1) getting the work done well and (2) developing the talent of the people they supervise. Both should be considered when matching work to talent and the benefits of long-term development must be balanced against short-term profit margins. Delegation skills are critical throughout your firm and should be emphasized in any development program. They can be learned from mentors or coaches or from internal or external training programs.
- Coaching relies on a knowledge of human behavior and a variety of learned techniques to help people identify and achieve their own goals. Coaching techniques include relationship-building, powerful questioning, strategizing, and advocating. Coaches advise, assist, and challenge their clients to achieve their full potential.
- Training offers "boxed" knowledge to improve skill sets. Mentors, supervisors, and/or coaches can help identify needs and opportunities for development that can be effectively met with training. Firms have the option of providing external training for individual needs or internal training when merited by numbers or a need for training modification.

Your development program must have a system for collecting information from a variety of sources. Information, both objective and subjec-

tive, should then be evaluated against the leadership criteria established earlier. Based on evaluations against

these measures, which are consistent with your guiding principles and the needs of your leadership framework, candidates will advance, repeat parts of the program, or be guided away from the leadership pipeline into roles that better suit them. Your centralized system of evaluation and measurement will minimize error and

assure you and your firm that you're doing everything possible to advance your best talent for leadership sustainability.

"Today's law firms operate in a climate increasingly characterized by complexity, economic turbulence, growing and varied competition, and accelerated change on every front."

The Changing Nature of Leadership in Law Firms, by Roland B. Smith and Paul Bennett Marrow.

At the same time, firms are facing a leadership shortfall in the form of retiring baby boomers and a relentless challenge to find and retain top talent. In this environment, leadership succession planning has never been more critical to the strength, vitality, and sustainability of your firm. **LIVN**



**Jo Smith** is a Certified Management Consultant and Executive Coach who specializes in helping successful firms grow their business. For more information, you can visit [www.josmithassociates.com](http://www.josmithassociates.com) or contact her at 503-234-5044.

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The advertisement features a man in a light-colored sweater and dark trousers, captured in mid-air as if jumping or falling over a large, intricate white floral arrangement. The background is a vibrant yellow with scattered orange and white circles. The text is positioned on the left side of the image, and the OfficeMax logo is at the bottom left.