



Marketing-Focused Leadership

By David H. Freeman, CEO & founder, Whetstone Consulting, LLC

What does it mean to “win” as a law firm? For most, it means attracting and retaining excellent clients. But that can’t be done without effective leaders who focus the collective energy, skills and knowledge of their lawyers toward achieving those goals. The leaders best positioned to influence day-to-day activities are at the practice group level, however, for many of these leaders, their challenge is to reposition their groups as marketing machines rather than administrative and educational units. Leaders who possess the right attitudes, skills and processes can enhance the marketing focus of their lawyers, improve service to existing clients, and contribute to firm profitability.

Organizational Energy

In a service-based business like a law firm, there is a virtual tsunami of potential energy that walks in the front door every day. How that energy is released and harnessed directly impacts the quality of results. “We want to engage the individual entrepreneurial spirit, and we must take care not to douse that fire,” observes Steve Armstrong, Director of Career Development at Wilmer Cutler Pickering LLP.

Motivational speeches may work for football coaches and evangelists, but to achieve long-term, sustained performance improvement, inspiration must come from within. High performing individuals like lawyers don’t need to get fired up. Instead, the role of an astute leader should be to reduce or eliminate obstacles that get in the way of their natural desire to soar. Common obstacles include unclear direction, weak strategies, inadequate client development skills, lack of teamwork, poor communication with other departments, misaligned compensation structures that do not support strategic goals, and lack of personal commitment to group goals. Once the energy is unleashed, it is the job of the Marketing-Focused Leader to channel it in a way that serves personal, group and firm-wide goals.

The Power of Permission

In law firms, there are fascinating dualities at play. Lawyers want leaders, but don’t want to be told what to do. They want clear direction, but require a voice in establishing what that direction looks like. They expect things to get done, but don’t always want to be the ones doing it. They also don’t take well to receiving orders. “Leaders can’t be dictators, but instead should be coaches, talent scouts and marketers,” says John Robinson, Board Member at Fowler White Boggs Banker. This approach is further echoed by David Wolfe, Vice Chairman at Gardner Carton & Douglas LLP, who states, “Accountability by inspiration versus enforcing rules is the key to being a successful leader.”

Effective leaders elicit that inspiration by using great finesse. They serve the group, rather than have the group serve them. They understand the interpersonal dynamics between high achievers, and rely on the power of consensus and agreement to get things done. From a leadership point of view, that agreement often comes in the form of permission; permission to be led and permission to be held accountable.

By getting buy-in and permission, the leader receives the consent of the led to be led. From this consent comes the authority to establish and enforce rules, to be the visionary, to develop a plan and to hold the group and its members accountable for their actions. It also delivers the power to ask others to act. “To be effective, group leaders must delegate ferociously, and have the guts and willpower to be sure things are getting done,” states Armstrong. In a law firm, where implementation of initiatives other than client work is so difficult to accomplish, this level of permission can make all the difference.

The Five Pillars of Marketing-Focused Leadership

Marketing-Focused Leaders develop plans, and then get commitments and maintain momentum so that the plans are actually implemented. This takes a special mix of attributes and skills. Attributes like a passion for helping others succeed, enthusiasm, visionary thinking, honesty, integrity, fairness and respect for others are hard to teach, and for that reason senior leaders should choose their group leaders wisely. Skills, on the other hand, are easier to learn. For simplicity, I have divided them into five categories:

- 1) Trust
- 2) Planning
- 3) Commitment
- 4) Implementation
- 5) Communication

Trust

Trust is the foundational basis from which all else springs. Few give permission to those they don't trust. Great leaders are champions for each individual – they build relationships with their people, know them, care for them and help them succeed on a personal level. They make and keep their promises. Leaders should ask themselves, “Do the people in my group trust me?” “Do I look out for their best interests?” “Do I provide useful feedback?” “Am I there when they need me?” From a group perspective, trust is built by establishing and enforcing ground rules for group and individual behavior. This is not by proclamation, but rather an open discussion followed by agreement on standards of conduct for the group.

Planning

A group leader “should be able to run a small business profitably, and should be able to facilitate cross-marketing, understand what they're good at and focus on the right targets,” observes Alan Cutler, Managing Director at WolfBlock. The centerpiece of a Marketing-Focused Leader's effectiveness is the development of a group-level marketing plan. A well-designed plan focuses attention, gathers group energy, clarifies direction and breaks things down into manageable chunks. It establishes commitments, creates deadlines and transforms diffused individual energy into collaborative action focused on accomplishing group-wide goals.

Buy-in to the marketing plan is more important than the actual plan itself. The key to buy-in is inclusion in the process. “A leader must lead people to the decision they want, while allowing the group to have their input into the process. There must be a place for discussion and input to get buy-in to the final plan,” says Debra Forman, National Manager, Strategic and Professional Development at Bennett Jones LLP. Two effective methods are either conducting a full group planning process, or designating a subgroup to create a first draft, which is subsequently presented to others for their input.

To create overall firm-wide alignment, firms should “cascade from the firm-wide plan, to the practice group plan, to individual plans, and finally place a budget to the objectives,” says Joanne McElhenney, Director of Business Development and Marketing at Brown Rudnick Berlack Israels LLP.

Commitment

Most people don't like to make commitments, especially when they're already dealing with a full plate. But commitments are precursors to action, and to be an effective leader, one must get commitments from those they lead.

Forcing commitment won't work over the long haul. Effective leaders find internal motivators and suggest actions that align with achieving personal goals. The key is to define discrete, manageable tasks, and once actions are defined, deadlines should be set for completion of the action steps, with permission given to follow up, check on progress and offer assistance.

Another tool in the leadership toolbox is management by peer pressure. When people work in groups, they're responsible to others and not just themselves. It is also important for individuals to make commitments in front of a group, and require a progress report at subsequent group meetings. Few professionals like to look bad in front of their peers, so this should stimulate significant action, especially shortly before the meeting. Gentle reminders a week or so before the meeting can further enhance compliance.

Where possible, accomplishment of group goals should also support personal goals. For example, writing for the group's newsletter can help an individual build their reputation and perhaps communicate with prospective clients.

Implementation

The key to any successful business is finding a competitive advantage, a differentiator. While many law firms search in typical places like practice niches, strategic geographic coverage, mergers, or development of star lawyers, there is a hidden asset any group can exploit – the ability to effectively implement.

Let's be blunt – most groups do a poor job of implementing their marketing plans (if they even have one). Great leaders recognize this obstacle and develop systems to make sure things get done. They do it by keeping commitments top of mind, helping people navigate through their sticking points and breaking down goals into small action steps that continually move the process forward.

Great leaders are also excellent coaches. “There are people who are with us now who would have been gone but for a leader who took an interest and helped them focus on getting better,” says Maria Alkiewicz, Director of Legal Education & Training at Sullivan & Cromwell LLP. Marketing-Focused Leaders also understand the subtle difference between skills and strategy coaching. In the book Managing Major Sales, Neil Rackham states that effective managers get more out of developing a client approach strategy than teaching specific client development skills. Helping lawyers prepare for a business development meeting and debriefing afterwards will maximize their overall effectiveness.

Reminders are very valuable, and can be done formally and informally. Tracking progress is also an important implementation support tool, but care must be taken on how it is presented and utilized. Tracking should not be confused with monitoring, which can feel like “Big Brother.” Effective leaders collaboratively build reminder and tracking systems with their groups so that everyone understands why it benefits them.

Communication

Good communication is the organizational lubricant that allows processes to form and evolve. Effective communication reduces conflict and misunderstanding, keeps people focused, develops relationships that drive cross-selling, improves the effectiveness of client teams, stimulates innovation and

enhances efficiency. It also supports collegiality and makes it more fun to be part of the group. Leaders communicate by taking the time to meet one-on-one with their lawyers, focusing on their personal needs, allowing them to vent, and helping them figure out how to solve their problems and achieve their goals. From a group perspective, a leader should communicate important firm initiatives, as well as champion the group's causes to other leaders in the firm. There is also an important external focus. "Leaders need to manage communications to their targeted markets in order to stay top-of-mind and be perceived at the leading edge," says Lisa Simon, law firm communications specialist and principal of Prescient Communications.

Successful Marketing-Focused Leadership is about caring deeply for the group and the people who populate it. It is about being a steady, consistent influence that keeps people focused on taking the necessary steps toward attracting and retaining excellent clients. Most important, it is about understanding the power of effective leadership, and the impact leaders can have on the fortunes of individuals, the group and the firm.