



Best Practices in Leadership: Outcome-Focused Leadership

By David Freeman, JD, CEO, Whetstone Consulting, LLC

There is no shortage of approaches for becoming a successful leader. A quick search on Amazon.com for books with leadership in the title yields a mind-boggling 16,782 entries! Given the volume of available information, the question our time-starved law firm leaders must ask is, “What approach should we take that would yield the best results in the least amount of time?”

One path is to identify the characteristics that define effective leaders. Authorities like Stephen Covey provide some guidance in Principle-Centered Leadership, while Jim Collins show us the value of being a selfless “Level 5” leader in his book, Good to Great. Endless other books, articles, tapes and seminars reveal behaviors and values great leaders should possess. Unfortunately, our law firm leaders rarely have time to truly absorb this material. What they need is a methodology that gets straight to the point, one that focuses on very specific goals. Instead of focusing on what they should BECOME, they need to determine what to DO. For that reason, an outcome-focused approach would best serve them.

Outcome-Focused Leadership

Stephen Covey asks leaders to “begin with the end in mind”. Once we are clear on what we want to achieve, we can build a plan to get there. Different firms have different goals, and even the same firm, at different times, has different needs. After working with law firms for many years, I have identified three common outcomes that most firms strive for: 1) addressing overall internal law firm management matters; 2) generating more business; and 3) raising the bar on providing superior client service.

Focused Leadership Inspires Focused Action

An outcome-focused approach provides guidance in environments that are generally not very strategy-friendly. While law firms are whirlwinds of action, the vast majority of that energy is directed toward billable activity, with a small portion allotted to other important endeavors such as marketing, business development, client service, firm management, substantive skill building, or pro bono activities.

Convincing lawyers and staff to dedicate a percentage of their limited, non-billable time to achieve firm goals takes finesse and perseverance. Focused leaders find ways to engage hearts and minds in order to inspire action in alignment with firm goals. Outcome-focused leadership clearly communicates what is important, and allows leaders to marshal a firm’s (or group’s) collective energy in a unified direction. It provides a theme to rally around for both the leader and the led.

Laying the Groundwork for Outcome-Focused Leadership

Have The Right People In Command

It is critically important to have the right people, possessing the right skills, as leaders. In many firms, leaders inherit leadership roles by virtue of seniority and/or a significant book of business. We know what it feels like when the wrong person is at the helm, and it is the responsibility of senior leadership to look past older models and award leadership roles based on merit, not status.

Develop a “Community” of Leaders

Law firm leaders are a lonely breed, yet there is so much they can learn from each other. Some leaders are good at creating group plans. Others may be models of consistency – meeting with individual lawyers, conducting regular groups meetings, gaining commitments, and getting people to follow up on their commitments. Some may have the gift of inspiring their groups to provide exceptional client service, while others are masters at achieving collaboration, within and between groups. Firms that facilitate greater interaction between their leaders will receive exceptional value.

Provide the Right Training and Support

In no other industry are leaders so ill-prepared to lead. We would never send untrained lawyers to handle our most important client’s critical matters, so why do we entrust the ongoing success of our firms to unprepared leaders? Can we really expect effective management and leadership to come from inexperienced, untrained people who have little time to devote to learning and executing those roles? It is the responsibility of senior leadership to rectify this by providing leaders with the tools they need to succeed.

Imposing one-size-fits-all, generic leadership training upon leaders, without regard for personal skills, specific situations, etc., will not yield the best results. The design and delivery of an effective leadership development process should include a customized mix of training, personalized leadership planning, and ongoing individualized consulting for each leader. Such an approach simultaneously addresses needs at organizational and personal levels.

Three Approaches to Outcome-Focused Leadership

Internally-Focused Leadership

Internally-focused leadership concentrates on building a more stable infrastructure. This need might arise due to a recent merger, or through unexpected, substantial growth or decline. It might come from a realization that in order to survive, there is a need to move from an older management style toward a more modern, business-like approach. Proactive firms that are grooming their next generation of leaders to take over important management positions might also drive it.

An internally-focused approach looks at a full range of factors, which might include financial performance and structures, marketing and business development, internal operations, staffing, training, recruiting, performance, and the delivery of legal services.

Revenue-Focused Leadership

Firms that are looking to generate more business use more of a revenue-focused methodology. It is an externally driven approach, which covers issues like marketing, branding, selling, client relationship management, public relations, and advertising. Part of the challenge is for leaders to determine how to use the right mix of revenue-generating tools in order to produce the greatest returns. Some areas to consider in designing and delivering a revenue-focused leadership program include:

- Enhancing internal communication and collaboration to maximize cross-selling opportunities
- Building relationships with referral sources
- Enhancing potential client networks
- Building firm-wide, group and individual reputations (branding)
- Building plans (firm-wide, department, group, team) for approaching targeted markets
- Developing individual action plans that align with higher level plans and that also serve individual needs

Client-Focused Leadership

A client-focused approach is a very specific subset of being revenue-focused. Client-focused leaders have seen the research, listened to their clients, and understand that getting (and staying) hired is based on how well they service their existing clients. They realize the bar is constantly rising. They know they are competing to attract

many kinds of “clients,” such as those in need of legal services, potential referral sources, legal talent, staff, and the community at-large. Major components of such a program might include:

- Developing a deeper understanding of what it means to provide superior client service
- Institutionalizing systems and procedures that support the delivery of superior service, such as increasing the number of on site client visits, conducting feedback sessions, and gathering information via client surveys
- Developing internal rewards and recognition systems that reinforce desired behaviors

The Strategy of Focus

In a profession that is hard-pressed to find competitive advantages, outcome-focused leadership is a strategy that can yield superior results. Give leaders the tools they need to succeed – a clear mandate from the top, the right people in the right roles, training and personalized support, and the opportunity to work together, and you can transform a firm.

"Reprinted with permission of ALM Law Journal Newsletter Marketing The Law Firm, November 04."