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Outcome-Focused Leadership

By David H. Freeman, J.D.

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*. 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. For that reason, an outcome-focused approach would best serve them. Stephen Covey asks leaders to "begin with the end in mind." 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 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

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.

Generic v. Customized Leadership 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.

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.

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.

THE END GAME

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.

Editors Note: Due to space constraints, this article has been condensed and edited.

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