



Douglas B. Richardson

# Practical Building Blocks of Strong Legal Leadership

By Douglas B. Richardson

THE LEADERSHIP DIMENSION

“...a lot of legal leadership is knowing what you’re talking about — and then walking the talk.”

**O**ur work in legal leadership confirms several fundamental axioms.

**Axiom I: Great leaders are made, not born.** To be sure, we all marvel at the “naturals” — the charismatic one-of-a-kind geniuses whose inspirational, strategic and operational gifts dazzle and amaze. Yet this is a problematic leadership model. These naturals often cannot explain how they do what they do and therefore cannot groom protégés and successors. Led by intuition, they may mistake impulse or personal conviction for decision-making, clarity and consistency.

Across the board, the best leaders follow a path of rational self-development: they consciously identify specific leadership competencies essential to their role, and they invest energy in mastering new ones. Strong leaders practice and fine-tune their skills and style. They seek constantly to enrich their leadership repertoire and avoid falling into bad habits. They adapt. They evolve. And they do not disguise the fact that their leadership is forever a work in progress.

**Axiom II: Great leaders have emotional intelligence.** This doesn’t mean that they are hyper-emotional, touchy-feely types. It means that they understand the importance of relating constructively with different personalities in different situations. It means that they understand the importance of reading interpersonal situations adroitly. They are self-aware. They are context-aware. And they can translate that awareness into powerful, lasting relationships — whether with colleagues, clients or other constituencies.

**Axiom III: Great leaders don’t do only what is comfortable...and they don’t shy away from the tough stuff.** Our leadership assessment research at Altman Weil reveals that many lawyers are extremely conflict-averse and often shy away from confrontation and those unsettling “hard conversations.” Since the essence of legal leadership is the ability to forge and sustain constructive relationships, this tendency is particularly counterproductive. Denial, deferral and dodge ball tend to beget inertia, foster superficial feedback, encourage political game-playing among followers and lead to allegations of special treatment.

Great legal leaders suck it up, dive in and confront challenges timely and assertively. In law firms and corporate legal departments, the catch-phrase “managing difficult problems” often means “managing difficult people” — folks with different styles, different interests and different needs.

Jeff Lutsky, Managing Partner at Philadelphia’s Stradley Ronon Stevens & Young, will blush at being described as a model leader, but he represents a leadership case study reflecting these three axioms. Jeff made his bones as a cut-and-thrust litigator; while working his way up, his colleagues would describe him as aggressive, autonomous, blunt, given to sarcasm and sometimes too opinionated. He moved fast, trusted his gut and covered occasional abrasiveness, but with a ready wit.

Since becoming Managing Partner in 2005, Lutsky has become a student of law firm leadership and implemented an intensive leadership development program for the firm’s high-potential leadership talent. He also has

set himself the task of transforming the firm's culture from cautious, even complacent, to growth-oriented, energetic and opportunistic.

"One of our 'difficult problems,'" Lutsky says, "was an historical style that reflected needless insecurities — about our firm, about our management, about our place in our market, about the risks of offending our prominent rainmakers and big producers. Because there often is power disparity among law firm partners, frequently the answer to a tough question was, 'Who's asking?'"

"We didn't always deal as promptly or effectively with difficult issues or situations, or with strong or difficult personalities, as we perhaps should have. This sometimes created resentment among the rank-and-file partners as performance issues or unacceptable behaviors became longstanding problems."

Lutsky realized that many partners had grown accustomed to avoiding or finessing a variety of naturally-recurring hot-spots, such as compensation, evaluating associate and partner performance, partner admission, billing credit disputes and a host of retirement related issues. "My primary strategic priority was to make 'Firm First' a practical operating precept. Until that was seen as possible and desirable, people would continue to play the same old games and dodge the same old problems." Lutsky soon realized, however, that that top-down strategy required bottom-up behavior changes — starting with adjusting his own style to create a model to which other attorneys could be held accountable.

"I have no name for this approach," Lutsky says. "It seems to me it should be common sense, but to be common it has to be articulated — in terms of behavior and in terms of accountability." His colleagues have noticed the change in Lutsky's style and most comment favorably. "It's

not that he's being artificial or manipulative," says one up-and-coming firm leader, "It's that he recognized what changes the Managing Partner role demanded and is working openly to make those changes."

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Lutsky recently took the time to analyze the building blocks with which he tries to manage difficult problems, and presented them to his partners. His thoughts read like a field manual for tackling hard conversations and difficult people:

1. The interests of the firm come first...*really*.
2. Deal with your own issues first: ask if you are the problem.
3. Act with integrity: candor and consistency are the foundations of trust. It's not enough to be fair, you must *appear* to be fair as well.
4. Problems must be addressed and managed immediately and proactively. Problems don't cure themselves.
5. Look forward, not back: no blame, no shame, just an assignment of responsibility to one person — with no end runs.
6. No special deals or back-alley alliances. Be up-front and transparent.
7. Understand and practice the absolute musts: professional demeanor, ethics, diversity, minimum performance standards.
8. Avoid black-and-white assumptions and one-size-fits-all approaches: appropriateness falls on a continuum and is not a precise spot on a graph or a page.

9. Accommodate individuality and reward risk-taking.
10. Remember that what you say and do is noticed and turned into a model by others.

Lutsky also has a personal behavioral punch-list, and he works consciously to hold himself accountable to it. "Like everyone, I have sort of a default style that I'll lapse into if I'm not vigilant. It's comfortable, but not it's not the most effective in every situation. So yes, I have a set of leadership reminders I keep in my desk drawer and trot out regularly." Jeff's 12 personal rules of order:

1. Don't pull rank: "Because I said so" doesn't work with intelligent, powerful peers.
2. Never pre-judge outcomes; you must listen and allow yourself to be surprised by the facts.
3. No public embarrassment or ridicule: have those hard conversations one-on-one.
4. Don't personalize these discussions, and never deliberately inflame an already sensitive issue to gain leverage. Similarly, never make personal gain or interests a primary factor in decision making.
5. You don't have to empathize (feel what they feel) in order to sympathize (understand what they feel). You must listen patiently, however, to gain understanding and to allow others to express their feelings.
6. Reality-test often to make sure others know what you're saying and what you want.
7. Walk softly, but carry a big stick: use your authority rarely but always have it available. People won't seek help if they think you can't/won't give it.
8. Make one meeting about one thing; avoid addressing multiple issues at once.

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9. Be consistent. Consistency is the cornerstone of integrity.
10. Follow through and keep your promises — as promptly as possible.
11. Be firm, be fair — and always appear to be firm and fair.
12. Respect is an attitude, not a behavior.

In short, what Jeff Lutsky's example tells us is that a lot of legal leadership is knowing what you're talking about — and then walking the talk. ♦

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