

Ten Tips for Leading Lawyers

Altman Weil consultants offer their insights

Q: *What is one piece of advice you would give to lawyers who are in the position of leading, motivating or persuading other independent, skeptical and sometimes recalcitrant lawyers?*

1. Establish a baseline of candor

Clearly establish that you will be honest with everyone no matter the issue. And seek regular honest feedback in return — you cannot know how you are doing without it. — *Tom Clay*

2. Explain why

Make sure your partners understand the “why” behind your leadership decisions. It’s a question that lawyers are most fond of asking and that law firm leaders ignore at their own peril. — *Jim Cotterman*

3. Think about what’s in it for them

Trying to impose your will upon other people is rarely effective — it’s more likely to generate resentments than results. You not only need to make a very solid argument as to why your partners should accept your ideas, suggestions and agenda as their own, but also make sure you are very clear about what’s in it for them. — *Eric Seeger*

4. Get face to face

Avoid long memos on things that are important. If it's truly important, get face to face. — *Tom Clay*

5. Enlist influencers

Lawyers in your firm will look to the most influential partners for cues. Ideally, go to the influencers and opinion leaders first and get them on board in support of a new initiative. If you can't get their support, then at least get them to agree to stay neutral or quiet, rather than oppositional, so they don't undermine your efforts. — *Eric Seeger*

6. Look to peer firms as (positive and negative) exemplars

Nothing carries more weight with lawyers than what other lawyers and law firms think and do. As consultants, we are constantly asked, “How do other firms do it?” (although we would much prefer to be asked, “What’s the best way to do it?”). To convince lawyers to do something, look for examples from successful firms that have done what you want your firm to do, as well as examples from firms that have not done so and have experienced problems as a result. – *Jim Wilber*

7. Walk the talk

Leading by example is very powerful and persuasive in law firms. The inverse is also true. Urging people to manage their practices more effectively, to devote time to developing business, or to maintain good timekeeping and billing hygiene is much less likely to resonate if the leader urging them on is not meeting the same standards. – *Alan Olson*

8. Build on small successes

Generate small successes and use those to enlist broader support on a rolling basis. – *Eric Seeger*

9. Tap into the power of data

Machine learning software can find patterns in large amounts of data that lawyers may not be aware of. For example, if a partner has handled many cases of a certain type and could gather data about them, that data could be used with well-understood algorithms to predict the cost of a future case and assess the level of confidence in that prediction. Such knowledge would help partners set their fee ranges or undertake fixed-fee work more confidently, and sell more work. Don’t underestimate the persuasive power of data. – *Rees Morrison*

10. You’ve got to believe

Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “Optimism and pessimism are infectious and they spread more rapidly from the head downward than in any other direction.” Law firm leaders may not have the lives of soldiers or the fate of nations at risk due to their decisions, but we know the profession is highly challenging and hyper-competitive. How can your firm succeed if you do not project enthusiasm for the cause? – *Jim Cotterman*