

# SIX STYLES

HOW WILL YOU HANDLE YOUR FIRM'S REINS?



**By Larry Richard and Mark Sirkin.** In today's challenging and rapidly changing marketplace, managing partners need to do much more than "manage"—they have to demonstrate true leadership to get their firms around the twists and turns to long-term success. Effective leaders develop a clear vision of where they want their constituents to go, and then they lead those constituents there in a way that makes them voluntarily want to follow.



# OF LEADERSHIP

While these two tasks may seem straightforward on the surface, in actual practice there are myriad ways to carry them out. Some manuals urge leaders to emulate warrior chieftains (like Wess Roberts's *The Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*), while others advocate a gentler approach (like Laurie Beth Jones's *Jesus, CEO*). It's important, though, to recognize that one size does not fit all. People differ, bringing a variety of skills and personality traits to the role. And not all situations are similar or static. A style that works well in one firm, with one culture, might be disastrous in another firm facing a different set of challenges.

Research seems to show that the best leaders have a certain flexibility in their approach, an ability to match their style to the situation. Some lead-

ership styles are simply more effective in certain situations than others. However, the challenge is not simply an intellectual one, matching the style to the needs of the firm. The best leaders use a combination of intellect and emotional savvy. They choose the style that best fits the situation and then skillfully use emotions—their own and others'—to get the job done.

## Comparing the Major Styles

There are six different leadership styles identified by research:

- 1. Visionary
- 2. Mentoring
- 3. Affiliative
- 4. Participative
- 5. Pacesetter
- 6. Commanding

Two of them work particularly

well when you're leading knowledge workers, of which lawyers are a prime example. Two others are reasonably good for knowledge workers, especially when combined with one of the first two styles. And the last two styles? They are actually ineffective and even counterproductive. Unfortunately, they are also the two most common styles we see in untrained lawyer-leaders.

Let's take a look at each of these styles and how they work in the law firm setting.

■ **VISIONARY.** Visionary leaders are authoritative, not authoritarian. They excel at painting a picture of success and then inspiring people to move forward toward the compelling vision. Visionary leadership is usually comprised of two parts: determining direction and getting others to

follow. While strategy is important, it is only half the battle: The harder part is what the visionary leader does so well—clearly articulating the strategy, repeating it, and inspiring lawyers so they move in that direction. Firms led by visionary leaders are often characterized by hope and excited anticipation for the future.

■ **MENTORING.** Sometimes referred to as a coaching leader, this type of leader works closely with individuals and strives to bring out the best in people by building relationships. Mentoring leaders are focused on the future and take people development seriously. They understand the importance of investing in people as a means of developing the firm for the future. They elicit positive emotions from others, such as an abiding sense of caring and being cared for.

■ **PARTICIPATIVE.** This style of leadership is probably more common in law firms than in other types of organizations. Why? The nature of partnerships is such that a leader among equals, by his or her very nature, must approach leadership in a participative manner. The participative leader, sometimes referred to as a democratic leader, works hard to govern by consensus. This style requires patience, the ability to put one's own agenda on hold, and a genuine ability to listen to others. Participative leaders try to give their constituents an opportunity to have some control over their own destiny.

■ **AFFILIATIVE.** Often well-liked and focused on keeping people happy, affiliative leaders want their firms to be friendly, supportive and positive places in which to work. They tend to avoid being critical and seek policies and activities that enable everyone to get along. Affiliative leaders focus on

the positive emotions, with an overt or covert agenda that everyone should feel good. While their universally positive feedback is often appreciated in the short run, it rarely addresses qualities that need to be changed or improved. In fact, this style rarely succeeds when it's the only style a leader uses. However, in combination with the visionary style, it can be beneficial.

■ **PACESETTING.** This is probably the most common lawyer-leader type, since it is a style that comes naturally to high-achieving professionals who are focused on individual success. The pacesetter leader gets things done, at all costs, and remains focused on the end goal. For pacesetters, the end often justifies the means, and things like professional development, balanced feedback, even weekends off, are “nice-to-haves” but quickly jettisoned in the face of a demanding client or deadline. Their immediate reaction to frustration by subordinates is often to pull the work back for themselves or to reassign it with little thought to the developmental implications. The pacesetter's motto is “Do as I do.” These leaders frequently see feedback as a waste of time, adopting the position that associates or young partners either “get it” or they don't. Pacesetting works well when all the lawyers in the firm are highly motivated self-starters—but that is rarely the case anymore.

■ **COMMANDING.** Also known as the coercive or authoritarian leader, this type of leader excels at taking control, telling people what to do, and clearly letting others know when they are not measuring up. Such leaders often use fear as a motivator. Considering the high need for autonomy that most lawyers have, the commanding style doesn't work all that well. It can produce backlash and cynicism, and it

sometimes results in driving away the best lawyers, leaving only those who won't push back or who just stay out of the leader's way. It may be an appropriate style in an emergency situation, but it does not work as a sustained style.

### Putting It All Together

So, what's your leadership style? You can measure this using a variety of survey tools, including both “self-report” and 180-degree feedback mechanisms (meaning feedback from those junior to you). The latter can be especially informative. After all, you may be convinced that you are a visionary and affiliative leader, but if everyone else rates you as commanding and pacesetting, obviously there is a disconnect that you need to know about.

Data do show that as a whole, visionary leaders are more effective than commanding leaders, and mentoring leaders get more out of their people than pacesetter leaders. When leading lawyers, it's generally best to use a combination of those two styles, and to stay away from the pacesetter and commanding ones. But the best leaders utilize *multiple* styles based on what's appropriate in a particular situation. A key to leadership success, then, is to know what your default style is and to consciously adopt a style that is best suited to the circumstances. Good luck! LP

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