FOLLOWING THE LEADER

While talent can propel lawyers into senior roles, this doesn't necessarily come with a handbook on how to lead. **RACHAEL SETTI** delves into some of the critical requirements for effective leadership.

Leadership is a very slippery term with as many definitions as there are leaders. There also is a myriad of leadership literature out there with varying messages, though most concur that positive working relationships between managers and staff reduce absenteeism and increase productivity.

Given that a common reason cited for leaving a job is poor workplace relations (particularly with one's manager), and that the estimated financial cost of staff turnover is a whopping 50 per cent to 150 per cent of the individual's salary, the case for investment in strong leadership is rather compelling.

So how do law firms, full of smart, ambitious employees, sometimes fail to bring out the best in their people? In my coaching practice I often work with highly capable individuals who are specialists in their fields, and hence are elevated into senior roles. While the financial and status rewards are a welcome return on career investment, the people management aspects that come with elevated seniority are often overlooked and can be daunting to an inexperienced manager.

As exclaimed to me earlier this week, "No-one teaches you how to be a people manager; you just have to do it!" In other words, individuals feel thrust into the deep end of management with limited development and training.

Unsurprisingly, the legal profession is not immune to this – in fact you could argue there is little to no correlation between the skills required to be an exceptional lawyer and those required to be an exceptional leader of people.

For the lucky few, leadership skills are second nature, though for most of us they come via coaching, consolidation, trial and error.

So what are the ingredients of bone fide leadership? How do leaders successfully engage, inspire and motivate staff over a sustained period of time? We know that extrinsic factors (variables external to the individual) do not sustain motivation. For example, so long as one's salary is at least at market rate (or thereabouts), remuneration is not considered a long-term motivator. Instead, elements that nurture intrinsic motivation (inner drive) are much more likely to sustain a positive work experience.

According to Daniel Pink, a Yale law graduate and well-known writer on work behaviour, there are three elements that best develop an individual's intrinsic motivation to excel at work. These are autonomy, challenge and purpose.

I have unpicked these three areas of motivation and provide tips on how to develop them.

Encourage autonomy

- Give your associates the opportunity for self-direction and a sense of control over their career destiny.
- Ask questions and guide; let staff reach their own conclusions rather than you jumping in with the answer.
- Provide balanced feedback and allow your juniors to learn from their errors, rather than fear failure. Fear and creativity are diametrically opposed, so don't expect people to think outside the box and push to get the best results for their clients if they are too scared of negative repercussions. Humans will make errors, and errors must be rectified (after all, lawyers are paid for their accuracy!), but it's the style in which this is done that makes all the difference.
- Listen and understand the issues from your associates' perspectives. Explore what they think went wrong. What did they learn and how can they avoid the same mistake in future? Weave this into your everyday conversations and you will find that you can have these discussions quickly and productively. You want to encourage a culture where staff will own their errors (rather than blame others) and, more importantly, own the solutions.

Challenge

- Set tasks that sit just outside the individual's comfort zone, though are within their reach. Such tasks, once mastered, engender a sense of achievement and satisfaction.
- Most people seek diversity in their role, though thresholds differ across individuals. Take the time to explore your associates' individual needs and provide opportunities for tasks to vary.
- Remember, if the task is too mundane the individual will switch off; too complex and they may give up. To this end, support staff to set their own KPIs by considering their strengths and deciding how they can be stretched beyond their status quo.
- Don't avoid negative feedback. However, provide constructive criticism by addressing the issue openly, focussing on the positives as well as the negatives, and linking this to professional development.

Highlight the vision and purpose

- Impart the company vision and help associates see how they can personally influence a cause larger than themselves.
- Seek ideas from staff and use them where appropriate. If not, explain why.
- Help staff see the impact of their role on the strategic direction of the firm. Join the dots between their individual contribution and the wider success of the business. Attributing meaning to daily tasks is far more likely to unlock one's motivation to solve complex problems, strive towards lofty goals, and derive job satisfaction. **LSJ**

Rachel Setti is an organisational psychologist and coach who specialises in effective leadership and interpersonal skills.

rachelsetti.com

CAREER 101

Baker & McKenzie's **ANNE PETTERD** shares the ups and downs of her career.

ANNE PETTERD is a partner in the Technology, Communications & Commercial team with Baker & McKenzie in Sydney. Anne advises on defence and government projects. Another practice focus is the telecommunications industry, advising on telecommunications regulatory and transactional matters. Anne also leads Baker & McKenzie's trade practice in Australia.

What did you learn from your first job? (and where was it?)

I worked at a newsagents in Hobart on weekends. In addition to keeping up to date with celebrity gossip from magazines, I learnt a lot about communicating with all sorts of people.

What made you study law?

My reasons evolved over time. Growing up, I loved the great courtroom drama and speeches from books, movies and TV. In high school I knew a few lawyers practising criminal law who I thought were great role models. When I started studying law, I really enjoyed the problem-solving aspect of it, which was just as well – it turned out that great courtroom speeches were not my strong suit.

First break?

My first job as a lawyer was with the Australian Government Solicitor in Canberra. I started in the Information Technology team. Straight away I was doing complex technology work as the government was undertaking many innovative IT projects. I really appreciate the quality of work I had the opportunity to do as a junior lawyer.

Biggest lesson week one in that job?

Admit if you don't know the answer. As a new lawyer, I went to a contract negotiation with my supervisor just to observe. The other party gave a lengthy explanation of I have no idea what. Our client then asked me what I thought of the explanation. After experiencing complete panic, I said I was sorry but it did not make much sense to me. To my relief, our client wanted to make the point that the other party was talking rubbish!

Best advice so far?

There is always something new to learn.

Career turning point?

When Baker & McKenzie sent me on my first client secondment. The chance to build closer client relationships was great, but most valuable was being able to closely observe how legal issues interplayed with the other business priorities. The secondment really helped me find direction in approaching how I built my practice and understanding the practical drivers for clients.

When you are 70, where will you be?

I hope to be travelling and finding out that the more places I travel to, the longer my list of new places to explore gets.