

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BEST MANAGING PARTNERS

By Michael J. Anderson

We have never subscribed to the widely held view that lawyers are poor managers, rather, that generally most lawyers do a creditable job and some perform brilliantly in managing what are probably the most difficult of all business arrangements – a partnership of intelligent, independent professionals. Our careers as consultants and advisors to the legal profession have brought us into contact with literally thousands of Managing Partners throughout North America and the world. Over the years we have observed certain characteristics that the most successful managers have in common.

People say that you love what you are good at and the most striking characteristic of the most successful Managing Partners is that they **love what they do**. They seem to follow Harvey McKay's dictum of, "Do what you love, love what you do, and deliver more than you promised." Good leaders genuinely look forward to going to the office every day, and their **enthusiasm** is infectious and energizes both their colleagues and their staff. All take an **authentic interest** in the careers, welfare and families of their partners and staff and inspire feelings of loyalty and satisfaction. Loving what they do, they are willing to do what it takes to acquire and improve the skills and techniques that the art of management demands.

Great leaders have – The **Vision** Thing. "It was just a fantasy really" is how one, now retired, Managing Partner described his dream of growing his three man partnership into the largest firm in his city. "We knew that, if we wanted to attract the type of clients and work we were interested in, we would have to grow" He had a clear vision of how they would grow. To succeed with their strategy, they set out to attract the

best young lawyers in town by offering them more money than the established and larger firms were prepared to offer, by willingly sharing the more interesting files and clients and by offering an enticing vision of their future inside the firm. This firm is now one of the largest in the country. The necessity of a clear vision is so obvious that we are reluctant to state it and yet we are constantly surprised at how many managers either don't have it, or, which is just as deadly, cannot articulate it. Some leaders seem to be consumed by the exigencies of the moment and the firm lingers on feeding off the growth of its clients. As David Master has often stated, "A manager must have a longer term outlook than those people he/she manages."

There is such a huge difference in the working environment of a firm with an exciting vision of the future and one where there isn't. People can sense the atmosphere almost as soon as they enter the reception area. There is a crispness and friendliness to the way they are handled. It is a sure indication that firm's management knows where it wants to go and that everyone has joined in on that vision.

Of course, in a partnership, the realization of the vision requires a shared and **collaborative** effort and so the Managing Partner must be a **Consensus Builder**. This is a talent that some lawyers, are born with, that some develop as a requirement of their practice and that some learn the hard way. This skill seems to be inherent in the best managing partners but, as usual, the people who are good at something stay good because they keep practicing and as with anything done by people who are the best at what they do, they make it look

easy. But even the best managers will find that keeping everyone going in the same direction can be overwhelming and they will not be afraid to enlist outside help to restore harmony of purpose. One professional we work with told us, "When it feels like I'm herding cattle, I know we need a retreat."

Part of their collaborative approach is their commitment to "**Management By Walking Around**" Leaders know that the best ideas are often voiced in one-on-one conversations and that motivation comes from simple questions like, "What are you working on and how can I help" They know that for a firm to achieve its goals, the individuals who make up the firm must also achieve their personal goals. All good Managing Partners know that they must criticize in private and praise in public. In fact, most of them are continually sharing or giving away credit to others for successes that they have driven.

It should also be pointed out that there is a difference between "management by walking around" and micromanaging which is enervating and counterproductive.

Great Managing Partners have the ability to recognize the skills of the people they manage. The best know when someone is ready to take on a new challenge and who has the capacity and ability to handle particular stretching goals. Having that skill allows them to **delegate effectively**.

Because the job of Managing Partner is often too big for one person to handle in the most meaningful way, good leaders know how to delegate some management tasks to non-lawyers, associates and partners. They usually are also very good at delegating clients and files and then, importantly, getting the most out of all of their people. Part of their "Management By Walking Around" includes the **follow up** of tasks, files and clients that they have delegated to others. Once they have delegated something, they are always

available to discuss the ongoing progress, problems and solutions.

Dean Rusk once was quoted as saying, "One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears - by listening to them." Some lawyers will never understand the concept of **Active Listening** which is the ability to listen, playback the discussion and confirm the next course of action. The best Managing Partners excel at active listening. Seldom do you hear of someone walking away from a meeting with them muttering, "I'm not sure what he means by that". They are **clear and concise**.

Personal traits among the best managing partners we have witnessed would include a good **sense of humor**. In fact, the "war stories" they tell are usually about something they screwed up in the past. Real leaders can readily laugh at themselves.

The best managing partners also exhibit a **Positive Mental Attitude**. We cannot stress how important this is and how quickly negativity at the top will pervade the whole organization. Great leaders will take something positive from the every adversity. They can always put a positive spin on things, which is often so much more constructive than the critical/analytical approach of many lawyers. Best leaders celebrate successes.

Their **honesty** creates an atmosphere of trust within the firm. I have consulted with firms, not many thankfully, where there has been an almost palpable atmosphere of cynicism and even fear, the source of which could be traced back to the inability of the managing partner to be forthright and open in his relations. Of course, the emotion underlying dishonesty is usually fear, which leads to my next observation.

The best leaders are invariably **fearless**. They are in their current position to do something, not for something to do. They

take no pride in just managing the status quo. They are there to make things happen.

Almost always, the great leaders also **lead by example**. The faith and trust that good leaders build within their firm is the reward for the example that he/she shows in his honest dealings, his/her fearless decision making and dedicated efforts.

The most successful Managing Partners are **innovators**, they are leaders of change, and they welcome new ideas and new concepts in management techniques, the firm's practice areas, technology, and even opportunities outside of the traditional law firm like ancillary businesses. Leaders keep abreast of new ways of doing things and encourage creativity and innovation from everyone in their firm. Some even employ staffs who are dedicated to researching new ideas, techniques and technologies.

The best leaders are **decisive**. Whether they are tough decisions involving the careers and lives of partners, associates or staff, whether they are challenging decisions that, if wrong, could be very costly they will make their decisions and live by them. As Harry Truman once said, "Just make a decision. If it's wrong, then make another decision." At some point in their lives they learned, some times at great cost, that indecisiveness and procrastination are invariably more damaging and debilitating than a wrong decision (at least you can learn from your mistakes) and that the more decisions you make the better you become at making the right ones. The best managing partners are not afraid of "failing forward" as Tom Peters once said, they have learned that the odd bad decision is inevitable, is not the end of the world and is what they usually remember if they need a laugh. However, the ability to make tough decisions does not suggest a lack of compassion or insensitivity to those who may be affected by them. When I said at the beginning that they take genuine interest in the welfare of

their partners and employees, they are also aware of the effects of their decisions on everyone and ensure that any ill-effects, real or perceived, are alleviated as much as possible. In this regard managers are very cognizant of the how their fellow attorneys are able to handle the pressures of their profession.

Great leaders also often seek feedback from the people they lead. One way is an annual, confidential survey completed by the partners. Among the questions a survey may ask are:

- Am I more positive than critical?
- Am I accessible?
- Am I perceived as fair?
- Am I concerned about long term issues?
- Am I inclusive?
- Do I provide sufficient feedback?
- Do I keep everyone informed?
- Am I encouraging?

How many of the attributes highlighted in this article apply to you in your role as Managing Partner? Words like Visionary, Enthusiastic, Authentic, Collaborative, Consensus Builder, Effective Delegator, Available, Concise, Humorous, Positive, Honest, Fearless, An Example to others, Innovator and Decisive,

All of the qualities or practices we've depicted here derive from the love that the successful managing partners have for the job they have agreed or chosen to take on but they also are simply part of who they are for, generally, they are as successful in their personal lives as they are in their profession. By and large good leaders have a rich family lives, they take active and leadership roles in their communities, they have a wide range of interests, and they enjoy the material rewards of their success. In short they exhibit the same exuberance and drive at home as they do at work.