

Ed Wesemann on Leadership

Featured in the October 2016 edition of the [Edge International Communiqué](#)

By Sean Larkan



In a recent *Edge International Communiqué* we paid tribute to and farewelled our fondly remembered late colleague, [Ed Wesemann](#), a pillar of the law firm consulting world for the past 30 years.

In support of a conference program on leadership I was running in New Zealand in 2015, Ed kindly prepared a short video on leadership. I thought readers would find it interesting to read excerpts from the video:

'There is probably no other topic which has had more discussion and training and writing than leadership – we have talked about whether leaders are born or whether they can be trained, we have talked about styles of leaders, the concept of level 5 leaders, and there has been a lot been said about it – the presumption being that the firm with the best leadership wins, and that leadership equates to success.

We have also had two decades of success in the legal profession, unprecedented growth in number of lawyers, growth in revenues and growth in profitability, so there is a natural tendency to say 'let's look around at the most successful firms and if the presumption is that the most successful firms have the best leaders, let's see what the traits of those leaders are'.

Well, not surprisingly we didn't see a whole lot of consistency among the leaders we looked at.

I tend to think of leaders the way I think of symphony conductors – it is their job to hire the musicians, to select the music and decide how it is going to be played, and when certain sections should come in, how loud they should be and how fast should they play and finally, to get everyone to start and stop at the same time. We have an orchestra nearby here and they call it the Democratic Orchestra. What happens is they audition musicians by a sort of consensus process. The whole orchestra identifies them and interviews them and they also select the music on a consensus basis. They have groups who get together and decide what the music will be that they will play, and they annually elect their conductor. In candour, it is a terrible orchestra but they succeed, and they succeed because there's not a whole lot of competition.

And that in fact may be a little bit what law firm leadership is like in relationship to how successful law firms have been. If you ask a managing partner of a successful law firm what he or she does, the answer is often that 'I am responsible for building consensus'. But, one of the difficulties is that we are seeing a breakdown in the way you build or are able to build consensus in a law firm. Part of this issue is pure size; for instance, when you think of a law firm of a couple of hundred people or even a couple of thousand people it is hard to go around and measure and also build consensus. Then you build in the international element with different time zones, different languages and vast cultural differences, and you further add to this things like Swiss

Verein structures that limit the real cultural glue and it complicates it further. As a law firm is depending on the firm's loose configurations or confederations of lawyers, you end up with a sort of a breakdown of the culture that's necessary to operate on a consensus basis.

So the result is the legal world is changing dramatically and very rapidly for law firm leaders: they can't simply just enunciate what is popular. For a long time they have been able to look around and see what's popular or what's acceptable by the partners and use that as essentially the basis upon which they create their vision. It's a bit like politicians who decide their policy positions based on what people say in the polls. It doesn't quite work like this anymore for law firms, and increasingly it's going to be difficult to do that in future.

So what's the future going to look like!? I think we are going to see three things from leaders:

- 1. The first thing is that they are going to have to become extraordinary visionaries. Visionaries have the ability to look into the future and through creativity and intuition understand where the world is going, where the marketplace is going, where clients are going, where the practice of law is going and interpret all that for their firm;*
- 2. The second thing is that they are going to have to be extraordinary communicators. Now this is not just about being a good public speaker. They are going to have to be able to be storytellers and present a compelling picture of the vision in words. They won't simply be saying 'This is the vision,' they will be saying, 'This is how it will affect you and your firm and this is what I want you to do';*
- 3. The third thing is they are going to have to be builders. By builders we mean they are going to have to be able to implement the vision they see. Now generally implementation is a real weak point in law firm leadership and management but it's going to become more critical, not only in developing strategies but to be able to create alliances within the firm notwithstanding that many firms are now spread out both geographically and culturally and also need to form alliances with other organisations that they are going to have to work with.*

So, in short, the easy money that was to be made in the practice of law has been made. We have had the good years. The years in future are going to be much more challenging. As a result, simply being in the right place at the right time won't work in terms of being a successful leader. The leaders are going to have to do what we've been giving them credit for doing for lots of years, and that is going to take some very extraordinary people.