

Law Firm Leadership: Consensus or Command?

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By David Cruickshank



When I prepare to do law firm leadership workshops, usually with practice group leaders, I do advance interviews with a selection of leaders. One key question that I ask is, “What leadership practices are admired in this firm?” A common answer is, “Leads by example.”

Where the managing partner is seen as a positive example of leadership, we often then turn to discussing his or her style of “leading by example.” Some partners admire a “take charge” leader who implements the firm’s strategy and rules, while pursuing profitability. Others admire one who leads by consensus, especially when change management is needed. Which of these styles is most effective and when?

In my work with excellent law firm leaders at all levels, I have learned that the answer is “some of each” rather than “one versus the other.” Let’s start with a common leadership challenge, one that could be firm-wide or at the practice level: “How and where should we grow our practice?” In the first phase of leading on this issue, a leader who builds consensus, then helps the group narrow the choices would be more effective. However, along the way the leader may have to adopt a command style in ruling out some growth options. When the leader is seen as a “keeper of firm history,” he or she may be able to remind partners that they decided some years ago not to pursue more work in certain business lines, or that there are documented risks to some geographic expansions.

Consensus leaders also have to judge when the consensus-building phase is over, and action is required. One managing partner I worked with recently admitted that it was hard to be patient and seek consensus when his personal urge was to take command and act. He also recognized, wisely I think, that a moment comes when consensus can be declared, and objections recognized. Then the leader can ask for action and at that point, the command style needs to come out of the leader’s toolbox. Without that option, we see leaders who are paralyzed by consensus-building.

Firm leaders are also called upon to enforce the firm’s rules and culture. In a corporate culture, that would be pretty straightforward. The manager or HR director would point out the breach of rules and would command that you comply next time. Not so easy for a law firm leader. What should the firm leader do about the big rainmaker who regularly fails to submit billable time weekly, or to get bills out and collected regularly? In that case, non-compliance can become a negative “lead by example.” When others see there is no consequence, they are tempted to follow.

In this situation, the leader’s choice may be “command and persuade.” She would point out the rule to the partner and

persuade him into compliance – but in a short time frame. At the next breakdown, the leader will need to demonstrate a consequence that is supported by firm culture.

Edge Principal [David Cruickshank](#) advises firms on growth strategies and lateral integration programs. In addition to being a lawyer with a master's from Harvard Law School and an LLB from the University of Western Ontario, he is a trained mediator who has taught at the Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution at Pepperdine Law School.