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JULIOUS P. SMITH JR, CHAIR EMERITUS, WILLIAMS MULLEN

Are you fully communicating your passion as managing partner?

From the pitch to the boardroom, great leaders possess two common traits: passion for their job and firm, and the ability to communicate. Leaders need other skills to succeed, but without these two traits they will surely fail. In reality, they form a single skill set: passion without the ability to pass it on to others has little value, and communicating without passion rarely leads to success.

Winston Churchill said that passion is the only thing that separates an extraordinary man from a mediocre man. So, what is passion for the job and how can managing partners use it to motivate others?

'Passion' lends itself to a wide variety of definitions. Depending on its context, it can connote anger, desire or excitement. Its formal definition is an intense emotion compelling feeling, enthusiasm or desire for something. Passion influences our private lives, sports and business. Why would a law firm be immune? Good leaders possess passion for their job; letting others know about that passion is the challenge.

Demonstrating passion

The first characteristic of passion is hard work. In a law firm, hard work trumps all else. Lawyers respect people who come in early and leave late. Leaders who make the effort and put in the hours, both billable and non-billable, will always get the benefit

of the doubt. If things begin to go poorly, partners start to look at how hard the managing partner is working. Lawyers equate hard work with passion; the deeper the downturn, the harder the managing partner must work.

In a law firm, visibility often becomes the test of hard work. Showing the flag on a regular basis by visiting and listening to partners gives firm members a sense of security and entitlement. Without those visits and the effort that accompanies them, partners quickly become disenchanted not only with the managing partner but also with the firm in general. Those visits give the managing partner the opportunity to demonstrate firsthand his passion for, and belief in, the firm. That goes a long way toward convincing partners that they and the firm are on the right track.

Great leaders lead by example. They work long hours and have successful practices. Passion for the job translates into success with clients. Otherwise the managing partner will find his advice falling on disbelieving ears. 'Doing it' carries more importance than 'talking about it'. Passion alone will not convince partners to follow a leader. Combine that leader's passion with demonstrated success and the line of followers will be out the door.

Passion means that the managing partner believes in the firm. He not only believes in the firm but also demonstrates that belief almost daily to lawyers, staff and clients. He talks about the quality of the people and the work they produce. The managing partner constantly shows his pride in the firm and his commitment to

make it better, both as a law firm and a place to work. At every gathering of the firm, he talks about its successes and its mission. He takes every opportunity to remind everyone what a great firm it is and how much he believes in it. He climbs on his soapbox whenever he can.

Years ago, Los Angeles Dodgers' manager, Tommy Lasorda, proudly proclaimed that he bled 'Dodger blue'. That is a great example of the passion needed by great leaders. To be successful, the managing partner, while not necessarily as feisty as Lasorda, must possess the same attitude. He must be prepared to let everyone know how proud he is of his law firm and how lucky he is to be in a leadership role. That passion is contagious. The more the managing partner extols the strengths of the firm, the better it gets. Other partners will then believe in him and work harder to make the firm successful.

Of course being a cheerleader alone will not guarantee success. At some point, financial results and quality of work have to match the passion of the leader. It takes more than passion to achieve those positive results but, without passion as a foundation to support the other leadership blocks, success may be impossible to achieve.

Next month's column will focus on how to communicate the leader's passion for the firm to others and how to use those communication skills to raise the firm's performance level.

Leadership thought for the month: If you are coasting, you are going downhill. mp

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