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**JULIOUS P. SMITH JR, CHAIR EMERITUS, WILLIAMS MULLEN**

Why leaders need to embrace their inner ‘care bears’

Over the past few months, this column has examined the traits that a good leader needs to succeed. Those traits include, among others, passion, communication skills and decision-making ability. A leader may possess all of the necessary traits, but still no one follows him. Why?

In order for people to respond to a leader, they must trust him. A leader creates that trust by genuinely caring for the people he leads. That caring makes people want to follow. More importantly, it makes those same people want the leader to succeed. In short, a leader can approach his job with great passion. He can also possess great communication skills. Unfortunately, that is not enough. He must also care about the people he leads.

In sports, you often hear a coach referred to as a ‘player’s coach’. That doesn’t mean that the coach is soft or doesn’t demand effort from his players. In the modern vernacular, it means that he has their back. The players know that their coach will not ask them to do anything that will hurt them, be detrimental to their careers, or in any way damage the team. In short, they know that he cares about them and their future. Those same traits apply to law firm leadership.

As noted in my previous column, a law firm leader must be able to make



tough decisions. Caring for people doesn’t defer those decisions or lead the firm in a direction not in its best interest. Simply stated, the leader who cares about his constituents keeps them in mind when making decisions. He understands how his decisions will affect them and takes that into account when deciding what to do. He still makes the decisions, but understands their full ramifications.

Law firms want and need strong leaders. They also want their leaders to understand how their decisions impact everyone in the firm, from the senior partner to the receptionist. Showing the ability to understand the impact of each decision creates trust among your constituents. That trust leads to success.

“Morale often makes the difference between success and failure in a law firm”

The ultimate test

To find out how a leader is performing in a law firm, just ask a legal secretary. Two groups of people can’t be fooled: children and legal secretaries. They can spot a phony a mile away. Secretaries quickly see true compassion and caring. Conversely, they can recognise someone who only talks a good game but really cares little about the rank and file. Test a potential leader’s caring meter with the secretaries: the result will give a good prediction of success or failure.

The good leader shows he cares every day. He proudly wears the caring badge – not in a phony, ostentatious manner, but in a way that counts and shows. He doesn’t talk about how much he cares about his people; he lives it. He takes every opportunity to talk to his employees. He asks about their families. He asks about their work. Most importantly, he listens, and remembers their answers. That level of interest fosters trust

and leads to success. Tough decisions may test a leader’s popularity – that comes with the job. But, no matter how tough a decision, a leader who cares about his people will not lose their trust.

Why is it important to have the support of staff and members of the firm other than partners? Morale often makes the difference between success and failure in a law firm. Every employee can impact a firm’s morale and, ultimately, the success of the firm. During tough times, the good leader needs to have everyone in his corner. Implementing tough decisions requires universal buy-in. Employees who trust their leader and believe he cares about them will give him that needed support.

A genuine and caring leader’s message resonates much better with his constituency. Conversely, a message from someone suffering from a lack of trust will be seen only as another effort to achieve better results. Ironically, the genuine and caring message leads to better results, but it is a product of the message, not its purpose.

Maintaining trust

In sum, a leader may possess all of the traits necessary to succeed and still fail. It’s axiomatic that, to be a good leader, people must follow you. Creating that desire to follow presents a much bigger challenge in practice than in theory.

People won’t follow their leader unless they trust him and believe that he cares about them. A leader who loses the trust of his constituents has little chance of succeeding. To maintain that trust, he must show on a daily basis that he cares about everyone who works with him. A leader who shows that level of caring will find a long line of people eager to be led.

The leadership thought of the month: Treat the receptionist like your boss. **MP**

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