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an offshore law firm'



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Are you a leader or manager?

There is a difference

Managing partners generally fall into two categories: leaders and managers. While the differences may not be apparent, they exist. Whether he is a leader or a manager generally reflects the mindset of the managing partner. Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky best illustrates the difference between the two roles. When asked why he was such a great hockey player, Gretzky replied: "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been."

A leader knows where he wants the firm to go. He devotes his energy and talents to fulfilling that vision. It may take a month, six months or three years to get there – it makes no difference. The leader always knows where the puck is going. He tries to get the firm there ahead of everyone else. On the other hand, a manager thrives on the status quo. He believes that 'rocking the boat' leads to problems and difficulties, both for him and the law firm. He puts the firm on a safe and steady course. Utopia is everyone doing their job, as he defines it.

Other differences emerge between the leader and the manager. In simplest terms, a leader empowers his people. He sets the firm's direction and expects each person to get there on his own. He gives them resources and opportunities to grow their practice and, thereby, the firm. He does not do this in a vacuum. He sets goals, and pushes people to achieve those goals. In setting goals, he is mindful of the need to stretch people to make them better. He masters the carrot and stick, all the while knowing where the road leads.

On the other hand, managers generally try to control the workforce. They become uncomfortable when people colour outside the lines. Generally, a manager creates a job description and looks for someone to fill that job. Expanding the job or taking the job in a new, or different, direction

makes the manager nervous. In his view, the status quo with moderate growth presents a safe course. That approach minimises surprises and keeps the law firm on a steady path. He believes that setting boundaries and keeping people within those boundaries leads to success.

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What lawyers need

Applying the difference between a leader and a manager to a law firm presents some challenges. In reality, lawyers do not like to be controlled, but they like controls. They enjoy the freedom to go about their business, to grow their practice and to fulfil their ambitions.

At the same time, lawyers are repelled by chaos. They expect a leader to set goals and boundaries. The boundaries relate to client acceptance, billing, hours worked and collections. Lawyers thrive in an atmosphere that sets a goal and rewards them when they achieve it. A lack of goals or boundaries makes lawyers uncomfortable. Ultimately, they will move to a place with a more structured environment.

Lawyers, regardless of their time and grade, believe that the next big case is just around the corner. They want the flexibility to pursue that case leading to the 'big shipwreck' that will be the hallmark of their career. At the same time, they expect restrictions on how a firm's money can be spent in chasing bad decisions.

So, the leader must empower his people, but also use controls to ensure lawyers adhere to standards that make the firm better. On the other hand, managers face a different and, indeed, insurmountable challenge. Lawyers will not be controlled. Trying to do so makes for a long and difficult course.

The difference between a leader and manager also applies to staff. Generally, law firms underutilise their greatest asset – their staff. The staff have a unique opportunity to make the lawyers and the firm better. Yet, many firms slot staff members within a certain range and never expect them to be anything more. Firms that encourage creativity at the staff level find better morale and a much better work product for the firm. These same firms encourage staff thought and input in ways to make law practice easier and firms more successful.

The days of everyone in their place with a sunny face have long since passed. Staff expect to be challenged. Good leaders make sure that happens. As an aside, good leaders also make sure that their staff are rewarded when the firm has a good year. It's called team building. Small bonuses reap great rewards in morale and productivity.

Direction and controls

In summary, successful firms have leaders not managers. These leaders create a direction for the firm, sell that direction to firm members and then empower the lawyers to help the firm achieve that vision. At the same time, they understand the difference between setting controls for lawyers and trying to control them. The former leads to success. The latter creates an impossible task. ^{mp}

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