

# Practice Management

## A Perfect Alignment

ILTA White Paper September 2009

# Learn to Lead — The Rest Will Follow

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**Y**ou've exceeded expectations consistently for years as an analyst. You have demonstrated diligence and excellent customer service as a project coordinator. You have been recognized as a competent and reliable supervisor. And at this year's performance review, your boss gives you the best news of all. Congratulations! You've just been promoted to manager. The announcement is made to the firm. You move to your new office. The congratulatory e-mail messages start coming in. A team meeting is called and everyone looks at you. Now what?


This scenario is too familiar to many practice management professionals. Administrative staff promotions in law firms frequently come with seniority or exemplary project performance instead of as key milestones in a continuous process of training and development. This practice leaves newly minted managers at a distinct disadvantage. The environment in today's law firms is fast-paced and demanding. Shrinking budgets, enormous workloads, long hours and the pressures of numerous competing priorities are common for most administrative staff departments. To succeed under these conditions requires more than good managerial skills, job knowledge and seniority. It takes leadership.

But what is leadership, and how does it differ from management? What are the practices and behaviors of an effective leader? How can they be leveraged to meet the specific challenges faced by practice management

professionals? The answers to these questions are not as obvious as they might seem. Formal leadership development has long been a part of the culture of many corporations and institutions, and some have embraced it with an almost religious fervor. Conversely, it has only been relatively recently that leadership development has started to gain traction in the administrative departments of law firms. Vaughn Burke, Director of Human Resources at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP and Affiliates, described the high value his firm places on leadership for its administrative managers:

*"By placing a priority on leadership development training for our administrative managers, we have been able to equip high-potential employees with tools and skills that are aligned with our key business objectives and that have been employed by firm leaders for many years. Among the collateral benefits of formalized leadership development training are the creation of a forum for the exchange of ideas and an opportunity to build a support network of colleagues. The synergies that have evolved from these shared learning experiences have exceeded our expectations and continue to validate our training initiatives."*

Many firms now recognize the effects that leadership has on an organization's performance and how excellence in both management and leadership is required in order to achieve organizational goals. They have seen that by leveraging a series



of best practices and monitoring for their corresponding measures of success, administrative professionals can immediately begin to transform themselves from managers to leaders.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership experts offer widely varying descriptions of leadership. Peter Drucker, author of “The Practice of Management” and widely regarded as the creator of the discipline of modern management, said that “management is doing things right, leadership is doing the right things.” Colin Powell, whose reputation as a leader is impeccable, described leadership as “problem solving.” Kenneth Blanchard, one of today’s most prominent leadership experts and the author of “The One Minute Manager,” said that “the key to successful leadership is influence, not authority.” For the purposes of our discussion, we define leadership as the ability to inspire others to act towards the achievement of a commonly held vision.

Although descriptions and definitions of leadership vary widely among the experts, an astute observer will notice a common factor demonstrated by successful leaders. These seasoned professionals have mastered skills identified as emotional intelligence (EI) by Daniel Goleman in his 1995 book, “Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence.” He describes the following emotionally intelligent qualities:

- **Self-awareness (self-assessment and self-confidence)**
- **Self-management (self-control, transparency, adaptability, achievement, initiative and optimism)**
- **Social awareness (empathy, organizational awareness and service)**
- **Relationship management (inspiration, influence, developing others, change catalyst, conflict management, teamwork and collaboration)**

EI enables a practice management leader to foster a set of skills that are useful in dealing with the everyday challenges found in the typical law firm environment. These skills range from managing the team to managing the expectations of demanding lawyers. Emotionally intelligent leaders are always mindful of these qualities and choose to apply them skillfully as they inspire others and move them toward action. Daniel Goleman and other researchers concluded that emotionally intelligent qualities and leadership skills can be developed, giving individuals

the opportunity to transform themselves from great managers to great leaders.

## LEADERS HAVE A VISION OF THE FUTURE

One quality consistently found in effective leadership is the leader’s ability to create and communicate a clear vision of the future. A recent *Harvard Business Review* article by Michael D. Watkins suggested that “One of the top three critical dimensions for a new leader includes articulating a vision.” Properly crafted, a vision provides members of an organization with a driving sense of purpose or an inspiration to excel. As an example, consider the vision statement from an AmLaw 100 litigation support department, “We will provide world-class service in all of our technical disciplines and become the best litigation support organization in the industry.”

This simple description of the future state of the department sets an admirable goal that all of its members can collectively strive to achieve. It also illustrates that a vision can be intensely inspirational when shared by all members of an organization. People will start to reflect and ask themselves what they can do to help move the department toward its goal. It is important to remember that having a clearly defined vision is just the first step. Highly effective leaders must gain “buy in” by flexing their EI as well as skillfully and relentlessly communicating their vision to others.

## LEADERS INSPIRE OTHERS TO ACT TOWARD THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THEIR VISIONS

If you look around your own organization, you are bound to notice at least one team with members who are highly engaged in what they’re doing and working collaboratively toward clearly communicated goals. They are providing feedback to one another willingly and comfortably and sharing information and ideas openly. You might also notice a certain kind of respect between the staff members and their manager. This is a high-performing team that is consistently delivering results to its customers. How did this happen? The odds are strong that this team has an emotionally intelligent leader — one who chooses to apply the four qualities of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management to inspire the team continuously to reach its highest potential. This is a leader who demonstrates personal integrity, humility, commitment, character, drive, encouragement and respect for team members. He or she is a person whose behaviors include influencing, challenging, persuading or simply engendering enthusiasm and optimism about the organization, its work and its objectives. A great deal of empirical evidence confirms that these behaviors affect the team in a positive way. Steven J. Stein and Howard E. Book, experts on the subject of EI, cite numerous studies that have shown that EI can be linked conclusively to workplace success.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEADING AND MANAGING

One C-level administrator for a large international law firm described high-performing teams as “low-drama teams.” They function at a high level and routinely exceed expectations while providing all necessary self-maintenance. These teams have leaders who consistently use emotionally intelligent qualities to manage team performance. These leaders are role models for their teams, supporting and encouraging the development of these same qualities in the team members they manage.

The teams that struggle, often described as “high-drama” or “low-performing” groups, also have characteristics that are easy to spot. These include staff members who aren’t communicating openly or comfortably, little or no feedback among team members, lack of initiative, and worst of all, “revolving door” staffing with frequent turnover of good talent. These teams, if they are meeting expectations at all, are just barely doing so and with an inordinate amount of effort. In many cases, the managers of these teams are just as experienced, knowledgeable, organized and capable of managing their organizations as their counterparts on the high-performing teams. What makes these teams so different?

The answer can be found by examining the difference between leadership and management. “There is a profound difference between management and leadership, and both are important. To manage means to bring about, to accomplish, to have charge of or responsibility for, to conduct. Leading is influencing, guiding in a direction, course, action or opinion. The distinction is crucial,” said leadership expert Warren Bennis.

Bennis made an important distinction. Simply providing a team with good management is not sufficient if consistently high performance is the goal. Management focuses on the mechanics of keeping an organization functioning such as planning, budgeting, policy-making and other forms of organizational control. In the absence of leadership, maintaining this control becomes more difficult, and team performance almost inevitably deteriorates. This is especially true if the nature, frequency or degree of the demands imposed on the team continuously vary. And that is the natural state for most practice management organizations. Sound management and effective leadership are complementary capabilities that must be present in order for the team to be continuously successful. New managers are well-advised to pay attention to both their management responsibilities and the development of their leadership qualities.

## PRACTICAL STEPS TO BECOMING A PRACTICE MANAGEMENT LEADER

These steps can be taken immediately to begin developing and applying emotionally intelligent leadership qualities as you begin your transformation into a practice management leader:

- **Link Performance Expectations to Your Vision**

Leadership is the ability to inspire others to act toward the achievement of a commonly held vision. Some leaders face significant challenges in influencing team members to “buy in” to their vision. One way to overcome these challenges is to link performance expectations to the vision. For instance, if your vision is to be the best litigation support department in the industry, think of specific ways in which each team member can help bring this about, and use those as performance objectives. Performance management discussions provide a regular and highly effective opportunity to reinforce commitment to the vision. Everyone wins when you do this.

- **Flex Your EI Skills When Coaching and Mentoring**

Coaching and mentoring are activities that good leaders engage in regularly. Leveraging EI skills during these one-on-one discussions will dramatically enhance their effectiveness. For example, listen actively and consider your approach and tone when providing guidance and feedback. Check frequently to see that your message is being received in the way that you intended. Use these discussions as an opportunity to build trust, mutual respect and the skills and confidence of your team members. Respectful, positive work relationships will significantly enhance team performance.

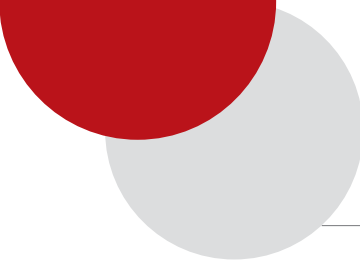
- **Develop Talent for the Future**

It is truly amazing to see the transformation in team performance when the team sees its leader actively supporting the growth and development of each team member. When you engage in this behavior, you are making an investment that pays large dividends to individual team members, to yourself and to the firm. There are many ways to do this. Provide training opportunities to learn new skills. Provide challenging and interesting work assignments. Succession planning helps to prepare future leaders. Mentoring high-potential individuals allows you to continuously challenge them while developing and building on their strengths. Step up opportunities by allowing an analyst to coordinate a project; give individuals a chance to operate at a level higher than they usually do.

## NOW GET OUT THERE AND LEAD!

In 2005, management and leadership expert David Maister provided this description of administrative management as it existed in many law firms:

*“Professional firms tend to be very well administered. Administrative topics such as financial controls, cash-flow management,*



*billable hour targets, receivables control and the like are in place almost everywhere and are deployed to great effect. However, all this is about managing money. Little or none of it is about managing people..."*

Today, many firms are working diligently to address this situation and this provides practice management professionals with a unique and valuable opportunity. Whether you are starting your first day as a new manager or your fifth year as a department head, it's never too late to begin to lead.

The road to leadership begins by learning to believe in yourself and proceeds with the continuous process of developing and enhancing the qualities that help to gain the respect and trust of your team. You can expect many challenges along the way, but there are also many rewards. Effective leadership leads to improved team performance, staff retention and higher customer satisfaction. These are three measures of success that are of profound importance to any practice management professional. Learn to lead — the rest will follow. **ILTA**

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