Leadership

What's Next?

Lessons From The Trenches

By Patrick J. McKenna

LBW LEGAL BUSINESS WORLD

Contents

PART TWO: In The Trenches With Your Team

PostScript:

Introduction

Being An Effective Leader
Is All About Relationships

It has been my observation, over the years, that many leaders rank low on empathy. They understand it intellectually, they just don't pay enough attention, ask the right questions or comprehend that it is not just about what your colleagues think, but about how they feel.

To be an effective leader you need to do more than just manage the bottom line and watch the numbers like a hawk. Obviously that may be necessary, but so is offering suggestions, being supportive, being a source of creative ideas, helping your colleagues think through their roles and helping them make the best use of their time. If fact, that is precisely what the best leaders do.

As you think about how you exhibit genuine empathy, here are a few questions for you to contemplate how you might answer, if these were posed to you today:

• Do you show a genuine interest in what each of your professionals wants to achieve with their careers?

Think about each member of your team. Have any valued members left recently or announced that they are about to? Are some individuals, with a lot of potential, performing at levels far below where they should?

If your answer to either of these questions is affirmative, then the chances are that you may have neglected to pay attention to something these individuals need to jump-start their careers. Paying close attention to what your professionals need in developing their careers is a critical part of any leader's role.

• Do you show an interest in the things that mean the most to your people in their personal lives?

All of the people in your group have personal lives that are very important to them. Consider: do you explore with each of your people what they are keenly passionate about in their lives? Do you ask questions that get them talking about their interests? And when they do start talking about personal issues, do you show anything more than a perfunctory interest?

You may think . . . I'm not sure that people who have a professional working relationship really need to talk to each other about this kind of stuff. What is unsettling for some to understand is that the qualities it takes to develop and nurture any successful relationship are the exact same as required to develop and nurture a successful team. We may need to reflect upon whom we spend more time with during the average working week, our spouses or our office colleagues.

• Are you there for your colleagues in their times of personal or professional crisis?

Every so often all of us confront crises and make important transitions in our lives. A family member goes into the hospital or a child is having a particularly difficult time at school. These various personal issues can very naturally manifest themselves in professional behavior that suggests a sudden disinterest in the work or, at the other extreme, people who are burying their personal issues in workaholic traits. Right now, as you read this, it is very likely that some member of your team is facing some

significant crisis or transition. If you are even aware of it, what kind of support are you offering?

_____

What is unsettling for some to understand is that the qualities it takes to develop and nurture any successful relationship are the exact same as required to develop and nurture a successful team.

_____

• Do you informally "check-in" with each of your colleagues every so often?

Then there is the situations when work commitments get over-powering, when our internal systems seem to make it harder to get anything done, or when a technology glitch makes us wish for simpler times. When these things happen, they don't have a devastating effect, but they do preoccupy us. One of the things that helps is having someone notice and say: "You look a little distracted. What's going on?"

If a leader takes a few minutes to listen, something special happens. We have a chance to "vent." It rarely solves the problem, but we usually feel better. If you're the person doing it, it doesn't take a lot of time or effort. But for the individual who is the fortunate recipient, it's special. It seems like you've been given a battery recharge just when you needed it. Do you notice when team members are frustrated or distracted and take time to check in with them?

• Do you offer to help when some member of your team clearly needs it?

If your team is typical of ones I work with, you are very busy people and sometimes can find you're stretched to the limits of

your capabilities. One of your team has just landed some monster project. Meanwhile, two serious glitches have just cropped up that were never anticipated. The question is, are you going to make some time available to help? And by help, I don't mean a few minutes being a sympathetic listener for your teammate. I mean as busy as you are, are you willing to take on some of your colleague's headaches to help him or her through a rough period?

If you truly seek to lead people I believe it all starts with determining whether you are prepared to spend time building and nurturing a relationship, above and beyond other urgencies. One of the things I observe is that those who lead don't always pay attention to the tremendously important role that relationships play in inspiring the success and satisfaction of those in their groups.

*   *   *   *   *

If you lead a team of professionals, this little book is for you. Your group might be a geographic unit, or one based around a specific project, client, industry or discipline. You're not people's boss, and even if you are, you don't want to act that way. You have limited, if any, powers to issue instructions, commands or orders, and if you have such authority, you rarely use it.

So here are some real-world tips, techniques and reflections from those who have worked in the trenches for many years.

In The Trenches With Your Colleagues

I spotted a great article authored by [Marshall Goldsmith](). Marshall and I both had contributions included in a book published a few years back, entitled *In The Company of Leaders*. In this piece, Marshall was talking about how difficult it can be sometimes when you are trying to coach someone who is resistant.

A very wise leader once told me that being coached is about being open to all possibilities. It is about being challenged "**to be a better version of yourself**." It follows that one might ask, how do you know when someone is coachable or not?

The harsh truth is that maybe this particular professional is coachable, but just not coachable by you! That is to say, it's not the coaching we resist. We are simply very discerning about *who* we will welcome into something as profoundly personal as coaching. When someone is attempting to coach us we are usually thinking:

- Does this person truly care about me, my career, my challenges or are they going through the motions simply because . . . it is part of their job description?

- Can I trust this individual to be candid with me but also empathetic to the situation or circumstances that I am dealing with?

- Can this individual serve as a good, objective sounding board and does this individual have some valuable guidance to offer me?

In our book, *First Among Equals*, my co-author, David Maister and

I made a specific point about how important it is, as a leader, for you to 'win permission' to coach one of your colleagues. We strongly recommended that before you can even begin to develop and stretch your people's talent, you must seriously self-appraise whether you have earned 'the right' to be able to do so.

Here are some basic first steps:

1. Ask how things are going.

Hey Jan, how did your meeting with the client go?

Keep conversations casual. Your aim is to find out what is on an individual's mind. Your best approach is to be informal and open-ended. Helpful questions begin with phrases like: "What's happening with…?" or "What did you find out about…?"

Identify an opportunity to help someone expand on his or her skills, knowledge, and abilities. Look for signals or cues indicating that coaching could add value. Take time to tune in to the need behind the words.

2. Confirm that the individual is ready for coaching.

Do you have a few minutes to discuss this? Would you be interested in talking about what happened? Perhaps I can help. Is this a good time or do you want to schedule something later today?

Focus your conversation on the one concern that the person seems most interested in or concerned about. Ask straightforward questions to gauge the person's readiness and interest. Let the person know that you are available to give him or her some guidance, some ideas, or some feedback. This allows the individual to be prepared to listen or gives this individual an opportunity to postpone the discussion if the timing is bad. If this person does need to postpone the discussion, make sure you schedule a specific time.

3. Ask questions to clarify the situation, and offer your support, help, or information as needed.

How much progress has been made so far? What happened as a result? Let's make sure that I understand. You called the other firm, found the documents that were submitted last year, and have now shown them to the people in our group.

Phrase your questions carefully so they do not pressure the person or imply a negative reaction. Begin each question with words like when, what, where, who, or how much. Frame questions that will draw out facts. Ask questions to build awareness, not to solve the problem. Determine if the individual has the right information to move forward.

Avoid questions that may evoke a negative reaction (questions that often start with how or why) as they tend to put people on the defensive.

4. Offer information as appropriate.
I don't know if this would be helpful, but two immediate alternatives jump to my mind . . .

Offer only necessary information, providing whatever this person needs to choose a course of action. Respond briefly, being careful to take your cue from the other person. How much information you provide will depend on the situation. To help someone resolve a substantive issue might require that you provide a fair bit of detailed instruction. To help with a creative solution, you might want to simply provoke the individuals thinking in different directions.

5. Listen actively.

If necessary, make some brief notes. Don't interrupt with your own ideas. Should the individual stray from the topic, ask a question to refocus on the same issue. This keeps both you and the person you are coaching on track, but it still allows the individual to lead the discussion. From time to time, summarize what you have heard.

6. Help this person identify possible courses of action.
What steps could you take to reduce the confusion? What other actions can you think of? What if our client could proceed without

this type of protection, would that affect the way you approach this situation? Let's look at the arguments for and against each of these options.

Avoid offering any of your ideas until after the person you are coaching has finished. Encourage thinking aloud. Ask for the off-the-wall as well as practical ideas that might be considered. You may want to make a list of the ideas generated, without commenting on their feasibility. Help the person weigh the pros and cons of each option.

7. Agree on the next step.

Okay, so which of these alternatives do you favor? What's your next step? When do you think you can have that ready by? What obstacles might you have to deal with in completing the arrangement?

Prompt the person to make a firm commitment to action. Clarify what specific steps the individual is planning to take, and by when.

8. Offer your personal support.

Now I've seen you handle glitches far more difficult than this, but as you get further into it, I'm available if you want to talk; and I'll touch base with you next week following your Tuesday meeting with the client.

Conclude by expressing your continued interest, your confidence in this person's ability to solve the issue, and your offer to help, if and where you can do anything that would support your colleague accomplishing his or her objective.

But what if all this doesn't work?

Raise your hand if you have ever encountered someone who seemed to be **uncoachable**. How do you detect a lost cause?

Posing that question to a group of practice leaders recently, together we developed the following list.

A lost cause is some professional who . . .

▸ blames others or uncontrollable circumstances for their un-acceptable performance or behavior;

▸ rarely executes on those promises made to the group;

▸ is usually defensive and never accepts personal responsibility;

▸ is constantly disruptive, uncommunicative or disrespects colleagues;

▸ is combative and creates conflict and tension within the team;

▸ may ask for others' opinions but regularly rejects those views when given; and

▸ acts as though he or she were a victim.

Here are but a couple of indicators that may signal when you are dealing with one of these people.

• **They think everyone else is the problem.**

Some time back I had a client who, after a two high-profile departures, was concerned about morale. He led a successful firm, but feedback said that he played favorites. When I reported this feedback to my client, he completely surprised me. He said he agreed with the charge and thought he was right to do so. He didn't think he had a problem. This successful professional has no interest in changing. If he doesn't care to change, you are wasting your time!

• **He is pursuing the wrong strategy for his practice.**

If this guy is insistent upon and already going in the wrong direction, all you're going to do with your coaching is help him get there faster. It's hard to help people who don't think they have a problem.

- **He is the perpetual pessimist.**

You can't change the behavior of unhappy people so that they become happy. You can only fix behavior that's making people around them unhappy.

Many characteristics define someone unwilling to become a better version of themselves. They may be individuals who are looking for a list of answers – seeking the secret sauce to a recipe for success. They may only want to share their ideas and don't feel the need to listen to anyone's experiences or ideas. They may get defensive when you offer a suggestion or an opinion. Some of the most intelligent professionals are unwilling to be coached.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to get inside someone's head so when dealing with someone you sense is uncoachable, depending on the severity of the situation, here are a few final options to consider:

1. Attempt to discern the cause.
Making a positive change can be difficult, and there may be understandable reasons why your colleague might resist trying new things or accepting your coaching. You are often dealing with very talented and successful professionals, which further feeds their rationale that they don't need to change because what they've been doing has been working. Talk to the individual about what dynamics might be leading to their ongoing resistance. Those factors could include a deep-seeded fear of failure, a pessimistic outlook that nothing could ever change, or even a fear of success.

2. Play a strong managerial role.
Rather than continuing to try to coach this individual, tell the person what you, as the team leader, expect of them. Some

professionals *need* external pressure and expectations to succeed. Become more directive in your approach by assigning them a course of action, and laying out how it should be accomplished, rather than asking for them to take responsibility.

3. Talk about gains and consequences.

Be frank and highlight the roads your colleague will potentially take if he or she either shapes up and starts being more proactive, or if they simply give up and resort to how things were. Sometimes, the most we can hope for is clarity. Clarity of what the consequences are if a behavior is not improved. *"What happens if you don't make the changes that the firm is wanting you to make?"* All the while we are trying to help create a gap between what they want and what they are currently doing in order to create motivation.

What I've learned: Know when to stop.

It is exceedingly difficult to coach attitude, work ethic, honesty or intelligence. Perhaps this individual was an incorrect hire to begin with; perhaps they were promoted to partnership well before they demonstrated the appropriate skillset; perhaps they simply do not want to do the heavy lifting that is required. These are situations you are not likely to ever win.

People Will Follow Your Example, Not Your Advice

In order to be an effective leader you need to take advantage of the power of modeling or setting a positive example. You need to **make yourself highly visible** on a regular basis in a myriad of different ways and use that exposure to reinforce what you believe in, what direction you believe your firm or team should be headed, and how you intend to get there. As a leader, you have at your disposal a wide variety of "trivial tools" embedded in your daily message sending and receiving activities that can be used to energize and influence.

For example, the time you spend **wandering around your firm** meeting with people is a powerful tool. Nothing speaks louder about what is of bedrock importance than where and **how you choose to spend your time**. Where a leader spends their time is not a matter of chance. You make choices daily about what to do and with whom. From that monthly breakfast meeting on business development issues to the selection of which particular **performance measures** to track on a regular basis, those of your choices made over time, send signals to your colleagues about what you believe to be really important.

Start spending 30 to 40 percent of your time on your **most important strategic priority**. Book up your calendar for the next quarter with activities that demonstrate your interest in and concern for that priority. Consider turning your colleague's eyes to new horizons with a formal system of "Strategic Forums" designed to formally force regular discussions on key issues facing your firm.

One of the enduring questions, a subject of endless analysis, is how a large firm can best monitor operations spread over many geographical locations. One firm leader I know reduces all of those elaborate mechanisms to plain, old fashion **face-to-face contact**. He visits each of thirteen offices as many as four times a year, meeting with different groups and support staff. What is your plan for providing hands-on leadership?

Find those professionals who are doing something that you wish more of your people were doing and **hold them out as models** of moving in the right direction. Let everyone get a clear idea of what behavior you most admire. Effective leadership concentrates on reinforcing and rewarding actions consistent with stated direction. "What receives **recognition** is clearly what is valued." People are keenly attuned to what is accorded recognition, even the most trivial manifestations.

Every firm holds numerous meetings, and every meeting has an agenda, whether written or unwritten. The cumulative content of these agendas clearly signals executive committee priorities and concerns. The conscious **management of your agenda**, and your input into any group meeting agenda, is another powerful signaling device. Also, those items that get your swift and detailed follow-up will always be perceived by people to be of real value.

And do not ever forget that the specific **words used** and the pattern of **questions you ask**, have an enormous impact on your firm's focus. You need to manage those patterns. People will just naturally read meaning into them. Why not target for what you want?

Ask Really Good Questions

There can be no real glue holding any firm together and certainly no leadership, without some degree of intimacy - some human acknowledgement of one another; that we are all people, each one with a unique story, unique difficulties and unique aspirations.

It all starts with getting to know your people, their strengths, their shortcomings; their dreams, and their fears.   And to that end there is no substitute for face-to-face human interaction. The very best way to get to know what other people in your firm want is to sit down and communicate with them about it - on their own turf.

Explore with each member of your team:

* What do you want to be known for?

* What makes you soar – what is your superpower? About what do you have a burning passion?

* What work do you find absorbing, involving, enthralling?

* What is your personal agenda? What do you want to prove to your peers?

* What do you want most from being an active member of this firm?

Our professionals need to either find the work they love and get passionate about their profession or get out. This is where too many "wanna-be professionals" succumb to the victimitis virus.

"How can I spend time developing a practice that will make me famous tomorrow, when I'm only rewarded for my billable production today?" they sniffle.

Some people spend more time planning their vacations then they do their professional careers.

The good news is that each of us thrives to the extent that we can achieve some form of distinction - an approach to specialized expertise or excellence in client service, or an innovative approach to client problem solving. It taps into the deep craving we all have to make a difference. The questions that we must help each of our professionals face and answer effectively is:

• "How do you want to be positioned in the market and in the minds of your clients?"

• *"What is clearly unusual, uniquely distinctive and of great value to clients about the services you offer*?"

If you feel that their answer, in about 25 words or less, is not convincing to a prospective client, they need your help and guidance in working through the future of their practice and career development. You need to help them understand that the only true professional career security is in being more valuable to clients tomorrow than they were yesterday.

A painless way to do this might be to ask:

• *"Tell me about one of your most challenging client matters and without any modesty tell me why that assignment was special for what you managed to accomplish."*

Taking that forward, have them write out the specific details concerning three of their major client accomplishments over the past eighteen to twenty-four months. Have them consider how any one of those successes may signal the possibility that other clients could also be facing the same problems that they have already solved. Have them consider how fundamentally different that might be for the kind of practice they could invest in developing in the coming months.

Now ask them: *"Could all of this point to the beginnings of some new area of personal and professional distinction?"*

Your Recipe For Adding Value

One of the most important lessons that you can help your colleagues with is helping them understand that in today's rapidly-changing world, we all have to continually assess our skills and adapt them to match up to the evolving needs of our target clients and markets.

You need to work with each of your colleagues to help them consider the following if they ever hope to keep pace:

Skills are more specialized.

Rapid knowledge growth means it is increasingly difficult for professionals to keep on top of everything they need to know. For example, in the medical profession there are over 8000 peer-reviewed medical journal articles published . . . every day! If you work or serve that profession, how in the world would you manage to keep current on new developments? You need to specialize; knowledge in specific micro-niches has become the reality for building most enduring professional careers.

Skills are degradable.

Today, the total amount of data being generated, captured and stored in any particular industry you can think of DOUBLES every 1.2 years. That means that professionals and their firms are painfully discovering that many of their skill offerings and competencies are becoming commoditized at an ever-accelerating rate.

Skills can be transferred.

The boomer retirement issue is real. Here is an interesting statistic: Of the thousands of equity partners that occupy positions in large professional service firms today, nearly 30% are just a few years away from or have already surpassed what used to be the mandatory retirement age.

Meanwhile, these same partners usually represent well over 60% of the revenue your firm generates. Smart firms are investing serious time and resources to ensure that the important knowledge of senior practitioners is being captured, codified, retained and archived.

Skills are increasingly portable.

That's the thing we've learned with globalization. With clients sensing that certain skills are readily available, they've learned about outsourcing their various requirements. It doesn't really matter to them where the skills are, as long as they can procure them when needed. Not exactly good news for you.

Skills are renewable.

Fortunately, the expiry date on your colleague's skills can be extended. If you can help them develop a mind-set and discipline toward constant improvement and invest some portion of their precious and finite time in developing new skills, you can adapt and evolve.

So, here is your personal and career building ACID-TEST that you

need to pose to each of them:

What is it that you know today, that you didn't know one year ago?

Or, put slightly differently:

What is it that you can actually do for your clients today, that you couldn't do at this time last year?

Now, my beloved partner, if your answer is 'not much', then God bless, but you may quickly be on your way . . . to becoming obsolete! What can we do together to make sure that that does NOT happen?

Qualities of Leaders
You Want On Your Team

Having been actively involved for well over a decade in helping professional firm Boards and Executive Committees in reviewing, assessing and selecting both practice group leaders and their next firm leader, there are a number of attributes that always seem to stand out. As you work with your colleagues and contemplate who you would want on your team, either serving as a practice leader, office head or senior professional, here are some critical attributes that I think merit serious attention.

Is this someone who . . .

• really wants to serve with you?

There is an interesting question that surrounds anyone taking up a top leadership position: 'Do you select the firm leadership role or does it select you?' I believe the best must have a deep internal desire to be comfortable in a leading role, in both good times and tough times. As you consider any colleague, reflect on their level of true desire to lead and their willingness to assume complete accountability at a leadership level.

• exhibits a drive to learn, to improve and never become complacent?

Is this someone who is intellectually curious and schedules a block of time each and every day to read industry news and track evolving trends? Self-development is critical: you should never

give up learning. Arrogance starts to take control whenever we think you know everything. You never know where your most important learning will come from.

• can listen to others' ideas and welcome "against the grain" thinking?

We must all be willing to gather input from a variety of our colleagues and create a climate of psychological safety, where everyone is willing to speak up. Then after gathering input and advice from multiple sources, we are far more likely to make a more informed and thoughtful decision. Unfortunately, some leaders are not good at or willing to listen to dissenting views. Strong leaders welcome "against the grain" thinking and the resulting debates – knowing that that's when the best ideas come out.

• can be confident without being brash?

We gravitate to confident leaders because confidence is contagious. Confidence is about believing in one's ability to make positive things happen. Confidence is important because your colleagues will always be looking to you on how to behave or react, particularly if things seem to be off track. If as a leader, you remain calm and poised, your team members are far more likely to as well. As a result, morale and productivity will remain high and any problem is likely to be resolved more quickly.

• can manage their emotional aura and its impact on others?

To be effective in working with people everyone who aspires to a leadership role needs to know what pushes their buttons. They need to know where their passions lie and how to manage themselves and others in times of high-stakes emotion, crisis and conflict; when backs are against the wall.

By developing an accurate view of, and aptly managing your own emotional responses to situations—and the ways in which you impact others'—the rest of any leader's skills and talents will be duly magnified and leveraged.

• is known to finish whatever they start?

It is important to finish what you start because the hard work of persevering is a necessary quality for every good leader. This is a character issue. It breaks trust with others as they come to realize that someone cannot be counted upon to follow through on what they have said they would do.   No matter how badly they might want to quit, no matter how hard it gets, the leader you want on your team will finish and finish well.

• is obsessed with achieving results?

At the end of the day as a leader, you are ultimately responsible for delivering results however "results" are defined. It is NOT about effort, which is always appreciated and very much needed – but what really counts is what is accomplished.

You have to keep this in the forefront of your mind as a guide to selecting those who will work on your team. Great leadership teams spend their energies on the most effective activities to achieve the greatest outcomes.

Remember always, to not let the urgent crowd out the important.

Stretch Their Comfort Zone

As a leader, every initiative you begin, every new lateral you hire, every process change you implement, every new idea you pursue, every speech you give, every conversation where you are required to deliver candid feedback to one of your underperforming colleagues requires that you cause people to stretch.

Change creates discomfort and discomfort drives change. The tension between these two paradoxical concepts lies at the core of you being effective as a leader. As an effective leader you must nudge people out of their comfort zones so that they stretch their skills and capabilities.

In workshops that I've conducted with practice leaders I often ask them to reflect back upon some individual that stands out in their minds as the best leader that they ever worked with; and then I ask what specifically that leader did. One of the more common responses that I will always elicit is how the leader they are thinking of, personally challenged the individual to take on some project or assignment before they perhaps felt they were even ready.

As a participant in one of my workshops expressed it:
"It is all in the pacing. I had a wonderful mentor who was a master at creating just enough discomfort that you were stretched to your limits, but not so much that you became discouraged or failed. And he always had my back. It was a great way to learn and grow."

It is important that people understand that as the leader, you are asking them to stretch to promote their career growth and skill development. In other words, the discomfort you are

encouraging them to embrace is purposeful, not foolhardy.

As an effective leader you must also pursue ambitious goals, confront significant challenges, and move your colleagues into uncharted territories—all of which will often require many of your people to venture beyond their normal comfort zones. Yet, we human beings are so hard-wired to find and sustain comfort – anyplace that allows us to feel at ease, in control, familiar with, and experience low anxiety. We are loyal to the tried and true, so much so that it is quite natural for you as a leader to then hear some of your people say, "I don't think I'm comfortable doing that."

As one firm leader expressed it:

"Good leaders invariably focus on bigger goals and new projects. Growth and comfort do not coexist. We take risks every day, whether we're 'putting ourselves out there' or not. The greatest risk of all is preserving the status quo and not being open to potential opportunities. Our greatest failure would be refusing to grow."

The trick (if one might call it that) is to carefully modulate between comfort and discomfort. Too much comfort leads to apathy; too much discomfort and people may be paralyzed with anxiety.

If your people become too stretched and fearful, you must throttle back and give them time to come to grips with the "new normal" (as it is often called). Once some competence is attained, it is now time to nudge your people into stretching once again. By sustaining this fine balance, complacency and apathy can be reined in, and your colleagues keep growing—in both the development of their personal skills and in achievement of the firm's future prosperity.

Ask yourself and your team members these questions to travel beyond your comfort zones:

• How do we challenge old assumptions?

• How might we try new approaches to problems?

• How do we proactively go about seeking new challenges?

• How do we define a new level of excellence for ourselves and for the clients we serve?

• How will we go about identifying and then building the new knowledge and skills that we will require?

• How do we risk being exposed and vulnerable, and yet achieve the success we really want?

As a leader you need to have your colleagues look at discomfort as a positive, a sign that we are moving forward, developing new skills and we are all learning something new.

Always Give Feedback

Here's an exercise for you to try. Take a blank piece of paper. Draw a vertical line straight down the middle. On the left-hand side of the page, jot down five recent instances wherein you did NOT give someone feedback . . . when, in retrospect, you definitely should have. This can be anything – from not confronting some partner who failed to follow through on their promises, to not telling your colleague how she could have handled a difficult situation far more diplomatically.

Now look at the first of your examples and in the right hand column write the reason you didn't say anything. Do this for each situation.

I'll bet that the **rationalizations** you have cited in the right hand column are things like: "no time, it's not worth creating a fuss, why bother?" Or, "I've tried it before and nothing changed, I don't want to offend." These are among the countless justifications we all use for doing . . . Nothing!

Let's turn this situation around. If you were on the other end of a confrontation that someone thought you could have handled more effectively, would you want to know? I think you probably would. So what prevents you from providing frank and constructive feedback?

I guess the only legitimate reason would have to be that you either don't like this individual or you don't really care!

After all, there is only one legitimate reason you (and every great leader) should give feedback. You give feedback because you

sincerely want to help someone. You're giving feedback because you are genuinely concerned for the individual. You want them to do something differently in their best interests and for their benefit, not for yours.

Finally, there is a strong correlation between asking for feedback and leadership effectiveness.

In a recent study of 51,896 executives by the leadership development firm Zenger/Folkman, those who ranked at the bottom 10% in asking for feedback (they asked for feedback less often than 90% of their peers) were rated at the 15th percentile in overall leadership effectiveness.

Meanwhile, those leaders who ranked at the top 10% in asking for feedback were rated, on average, at the 86th percentile in overall leadership effectiveness.

_____

Get The "But" Out

Here is one little thing you might try to do differently, especially if you are a leader with any interest in wanting to instill enthusiasm in your people. Instilling enthusiasm becomes difficult to accomplish when we unthinkingly fall into the habit of liberally using the term "but" within our normal conversations.

Consider the situation where your group has just hosted an internal client seminar and you are pleased with the outcome and also curious as to the magnitude of the attendance. It may not be unusual to hear yourself say to one of your colleagues; "*You did a really great job of organizing our group's seminar . . . but . . . I really had expected to see a lot more of our clients in attendance*."

Now how enthusiastic would you feel being on the other end of that statement?

You can avoid this "great . . . but" often unconscious but habitual mode of communication by either separating your feedback with time, or by separating your statements and posing a question. Notice how his prior communication could be slightly modified.

"*You did a really great job of organizing our group's seminar. I think everybody was pleased with the way it turned out. How did you feel it went? Did you expect more attendees*?"

Here's another approach – try replacing every "but" with "and" . . . and see how your colleagues react. "And" changes the very essence of the discussion. "And" is a team word, a joiner. AND

the interesting thing to observe is if you change "but" to "and" it has little effect on the meaning, but it has a huge effect on the feeling you convey to someone your conversing with.

It takes a conscious effort to remove the but, but an effort that pays dividends. Kick the "but" habit, and others will appreciate you more because of it.

———————————

Why Annual Performance Appraisals Don't Work

There is an interesting question to consider, whenever we review the performance of our professionals as a means of setting compensation and bonuses. Here's the question: how many hours are invested, both formally and informally, by some of the most senior (read: expensive) talent in your firm, discussing and determining compensation? And, if I might add a second question . . . how many hours are spent by individual professionals throughout your firm lobbying for or commiserating together about the results?

Now isn't it terrifying to imagine the cumulative, lost productivity wasted on all of these efforts? And here's the sad reality, annual performance appraisal systems are proven to be entirely useless as a method for actually raising performance!

One of the absurd flaws in most compensation systems is that they are heavily dependent on a formal, structured, ANNUAL performance appraisal system. They require that managers/leaders:

• give someone performance feedback on multiple issues all at once, usually attempting to sum up a years worth of activity (bad);

• rely on human recall, usually months after many of the events have actually occurred (worse); and

• conduct this review at the one time in the year when it all influences an individual professional's pay (disastrous!)

I believe the focus should not be on the annual review. Rather, let's ask a totally different question: How do I get an adult, intelligent professional to actually be willing and able to improve or contribute more?

Your answer should be fairly clear. At the moment I see something that could be done better, I must have the courage to speak with the individual about altering their performance . . .
I think this could be done more effectively such that you are able to achieve more. Can we talk about this?"

According to Dan Schawbel writing in Forbes, one of the biggest discussions in HR circles is performance reviews, how to transform them and implement something new that serves both managers and the members of their team.

Professionals today desire instant feedback, a behavior they've adopted from the instant gratification they receive on social networks like Twitter and Facebook. Younger generations are especially impatient and are unwilling to wait a whole year to learn about their strengths and areas of improvement. A whole one-fourth of employees feel that annual performance reviews don't help improve their performance.

Two of the larger companies in the world, GE and Adobe, have already abolished their annual review process in exchange for regular feedback. Adobe, the first major company to step away from annual performance reviews, created a "Check-In" system, where expectations are set annually but feedback is given regularly, resulting in a 2% decrease in voluntary attrition.

GE followed suit by created "Touchpoints," where there is a daily development focusing on results and changing business demands, which has resulting in a five times increase in

productivity in the past year.

Meanwhile, peer feedback is on the rise. I recently read about one advertising technology company Sovrn, which claims to have "*purposeful candor*" as one of its values. Apparently, in an exercise which is optional to start, teams gather in a conference room and go around the table sharing a self-reflection on what went well and what could have gone better, then inviting peer feedback from the rest of the group.

Consider, in a typical firm, committees can spend many weeks on compensation decisions. If that same committee or the various managers/leaders throughout the firm invested as much time providing performance feedback throughout the year as they do at the end of the year –

I believe these firms would actually make more money! What do you think?

You Get Exactly What You Expect

Do you ever wonder, why some people are more successful, make more money, have more friends, enjoy better health and derive greater satisfaction from their careers?

All evidence shows that it has little to do with education, background, circumstances or even intellect. The one common trait of successful people is the expectation that success is possible and then converting that expectation into daily, consistent action.

As leaders we often get what we expect; so if we expect something positive, it has a way of coming to pass. Alternatively, if we expect something negative, it too, unfortunately, has a way of coming to pass.

You may have heard this story before, so forgive the repetition, but it is one that I believe is well worth remembering:

On the first day of school, two different teachers in different rooms, were glancing over the roll when they both noticed a number after each student's name.

One teacher saw numbers like 142, 136, and 154. "Wow! Look at these IQs," she thought to herself. "What a terrific group." That teacher right there and then determined to work harder with this group than with any other she had ever had. Throughout the year, she came up with innovative lessons that she thought would

challenge the group, because she didn't want any of them to be bored with work that was too easy. And as expected, her plan worked. This group outperformed all the others that she had ever taught using her usual methods.

The second teacher happened to see numbers like 84, 68, and 91. "Gaad, what kind of a dysfunctional group of students did they stick me with this year," he thought to himself. Thinking this to be a group that was not likely to accomplish a great deal, this teacher resolved not to expect very much from any of these students or challenge them beyond the most basic level. As expected, his expectations were also realized.

By the sheerest of coincidences during the last quarter of the year these two teachers happened to be comparing notes on the progress (or lack thereof) of their different respective groups. The School Principal, overhearing their discussions, advised them both as to what those numbers after each students' name really represented . . . that student's locker number!

In another situation documented in Psychology Today, a young man who had "A" grades through high school received a 98 on his SAT. He mistakenly thought it was his IQ and ended up almost failing his first year of college. When informed about the difference, he went back to being an "A" student.

Meanwhile, in her famous research on discrimination "*The Eye of the Storm*", Jane Elliot discovered that people, selected at random, who were encouraged to think they were less intelligent and deserved less from life, actually lived up (or down) to that expectation.

So, What Are You Expecting?

For many of us as we grew up we were told not to "get our hopes too high" or consoled that "winning isn't everything." Far too often we set our expectations low out of a fear of failure. I'm

convinced that this kind of attitude makes risk-taking that much harder and spreads mediocrity like an epidemic. As a result, many don't aim high enough. They settle . . . for whatever they can get.

If it's true that you get what you expect, it is worth being very conscious of those expectations—and shifting them toward the most positive outcome. Expectation is a powerful attractive force and the key element to manifesting your leadership goals.

It starts with you making the decision to aim higher and expect more.

Is Your Leadership Style Emotionally Attractive?

Once in a while, I note a catchy phrase that resonates and makes me reflect on my own experiences. For me, "Emotional Wake" is one such phrase.

In the book, *Fierce Conversations*, "emotional wake" is defined as ". . . what you remember after I'm gone (perhaps when I've left the room). What you feel. The aftermath, the aftertaste, the afterglow."

We all know people who seem to be in a constant state of grumpiness and irritability. As a leader, especially under stressful circumstances, you may make an off-handed, somewhat negative comment, perhaps unintentional, but capable of devastating someone who works with you. You may not even be cognizant of the impact that your words have had. You quickly forget the incident, but as is all too often the case, the recipient can recall your precise words . . . verbatim. And long after he or she has left your presence, they will still remember the negative psychological experience that was created.

The converse is the ability to create positive psychological experiences, or positive feelings; to bring out the best in others, to inspire them, and to have them feel engaged.

Think back of some leader who consistently made you feel good about yourself, a leader who inspired you to do your best work, a leader who motivated you to go the extra mile . . . every day.

Chances are, that leader was an individual who left you with an emotional afterglow, not an emotional aftermath.

Effective leaders know that their emotions, both negative and positive – are contagious. They know that what they say and do can affect the people on their team and within the entire firm, for better or for worse. So for example, how much energy do you give off?

In most instances your colleagues want to be around a leader who emits a high level of energy. Energy is the intensity with which you approach every idea, project and individual that you come into contact with. Every single thing you and I do has energy – so it will either be vibrant or muted.

Take a moment to reflect on your leadership style. Are you **emotionally attractive**? Do you drive others' emotions in your firm in the right direction? Are people eager to give you their discretionary effort?

The answer to these questions can have a profound impact on the quality of your working relationships and, ultimately, on your group's productivity and results.

Five Questions To Guage Your Leadership Effectiveness

Irrespective of your formal title, your technical knowledge will determine a portion of your effectiveness; but the overwhelming determinant of whether or not you will be truly effective as a leader has more do with your people skills – interpersonal, social and emotional. Here are five critical questions to ponder:

1. Do your people actually view you as being someone who cares about others?

Were you chosen to be a leader because you are seen by those around you as a person of integrity who cares about others?

If you are viewed that way, you will be forgiven a lot of mistakes. If you are not viewed that way, then no matter how many books on leadership you read, you will fail. Character is probably not easily changed (or teachable) among adults with years of work experience.

A leader who talks only about work and never about personal matters will have less influence on his team. If someone is going to have influence, the team has got to believe that when she offers them a critique (and gives suggestions on what to do) that she really, actually cares.

2. Among those you lead, how many would consider you their trusted confidant?

What makes a person somebody you would turn to, eagerly and positively, for advice, guidance and counsel?

While any leader needs many attributes and skills, one attribute dominates the list: whether or not those you are trying to influence trust your motives. If people think you are truly trying to help them, they will listen to you; if they think you are nagging and exhorting them in order to make yourself look good, they will resist your influence at every turn.

One of the ways to become a trusted confidant is to let people know that you don't have all of the answers, all of the time. It requires you to be open to confessing your shortcomings and acknowledging your personal vulnerabilities. In making such an admission, you will immediately be perceived as sincere and credible.

3. Can you help people articulate their aspirations?

To motivate a colleague, can you influence them to make them *want* to do something?

Suppose one of your people says, "*I really would love to build my skills in this area, develop my expertise here, get more challenging responsibilities, and achieve the following kind of career development within three years.*"

You can then say, "*Okay, let's talk about that. What would be your first logical step? What help would you need from me? Let's think it through together.*" You need to understand each of your people in such a way that you help each one develop an individualized,

stretch-goal that custom-tailored to their needs and skills and one that they will accept as exciting and challenging.

4. Do people feel comfortable admitting their flaws to you?

Do your people feel comfortable talking about their shortcomings in front of you?

Your acid test should be: *"Are my people coming to me, or do I always have to go to them?"*

They will only come to you if you're even-tempered and there to help. Many people, when they first become leaders, are surprised by the amount of emotional investment it takes; and to do the job properly, you've got to come across as being on an even-keel.

5. Do you actually like the people in your group – and do they know that?

What happens when you try to be a leader to somebody who you don't actually like?

You could try to think positively – to focus on the positive aspects of the person and try not to dwell on the parts that you don't like. If you can find that one little bit that you can relate to, you can focus solely on that bit and achieve the necessary empathy.

Can you like everybody? No. But if you can't find *anything* that you like or can relate to in someone then you have a very difficult task because you can't influence an individual you despise.

Again, as I said, your effectiveness as a leader is mainly about how you handle the interpersonal relationships that comprise such a large part of your job.

Effective Leaders Are Not Necessarily Nice

Having spent a good number of years studying and working with leaders that I have come to admire, I have concluded that the greatest challenge for any of us in leading others is the way in which we are hard-wired; our natural instincts to preserve our sense of pride and our need to be nice.

Let me give you some basic examples:

- **As individuals we desperately need to be ADMIRED by our colleagues.**

For many, the degree of admiration we feel is congruent with our personal sense of self-worth. The reality is that few of us would be willing to confront just how much we need to feel admired. And what unfortunately flows from that need is how readily we might waffle on being straightforward and completely honest in any situation where doing so, might threaten us with a loss of esteem.

In other words, for those of us mere mortals, we will do almost anything to avoid the loss of our colleagues' approval and admiration. We will stretch the truth; we will manipulate the facts; we will hide what might be embarrassing or unpleasant; and we will, where or when required, engaged in overt deception.

As leaders then, this intense need to be admired also manifests itself in our propensity to reward those who display their

admiration for us, contribute to our ego, over those who produce results.

- **As individuals we want to be viewed by our colleagues, as being staunchly LOYAL.**

For many, we will vigorously attest to how loyalty is such a critical virtue. We want our colleagues to always perceive us as being loyal, even in those situations where the truth is that we may be acting loyal, but not in the best interests of the individual involved. And in such situations, how ready we are to sacrifice our personal authenticity and act only in our own best interests, to maintain the pretense of being loyal . . . again, largely to avoid any loss of our colleagues' approval.

As leaders our needing to be loyal has us often being unable to take action with close friends who are clearly underperforming or to let people go who are not pulling their weight.

- **As individuals we have a high need to do everything just PERFECTLY.**

Many of us have never learned to recognize when we have crossed over into the dangerous zone of "perfection obsession." And our constant quest for perfection can cause us to procrastinate. We become fixated on the perfect end-result such that we don't move forward until we are 100% sure that everything is going to work according to plan. We loose sight of the fact that life is messy and unpredictable, and that very little ever goes exactly as we would have hoped.

As leaders our tendency to be perfect then has us paralyzed as a result of never seeming to have all of the pertinent information available and consequently not being decisive for fear of being incorrect in the choices we make.

- **As individuals, we harbor a pathetic need to always want to LOOK GOOD.**

Finally, few of us would be willing to confront just how much we really do care about looking good. Our desire to appear knowledgeable, to have all of the answers, to avoid conflict and achieve consensus often has us sacrificing results for the sake of appearances.

As leaders this can manifest itself in our pretending to have followed or understood something. We pretend to understand, we pretend to know, when we clearly haven't the foggiest notion of what is really going on.

Meanwhile, many of us may have been stunned to learn that people like Apple's genius, Steve Jobs, ruled with an iron fist, was actually egotistical and moody, demanded loyalty while lacking patience in dealing with others and even reneged on promises he made to his colleagues. We just naturally assume that these kinds of high performers are nice people. But, we all too often seek leaders with qualities and behaviors quite different from what we claim we want.

As Todd Ordal, a former CEO in multiple industries explained it, the most successful leaders are NOT nice.
"There is a substantial difference between being nice and being kind. Nice is born out of fear and kind is born out of love. The fear of not being liked or fear of conflict prevents us from speaking the truth. But, most of the time you are willing to tell someone you love that they are making a big mistake, even at the risk of offending them or hurting their feelings."

Vivek Wadhwa, director of research at Duke University's Center for Entrepreneurship claims that the best companies are run by what he calls, "enlightened dictators." His view is that we all typically follow strong leaders who are effective in attaining their

goals and who offer us a meaningful direction to pursue, conviction that we can all work together to attain our goals and supported by good values. Wadhwa says, "*I know that dictatorship doesn't sound nice, but it is what business leadership entails*."

Professors Steve Kaplan and three University of Chicago business school academics analyzed the detailed personal assessments of 313 CEOs and found that those whose primary strengths were in being decisive and driving performance, significantly outperformed CEOs known for their building consensus and listening skills. They claimed that they were profoundly surprised to find that the 'soft' skills centering on teamwork weren't as paramount as the 'hard' skills that were all about getting things done. Professor Kaplan cautions against "dismissing entirely" the soft skills, but he and his colleagues clearly found that leaders displaying tough-minded traits like following through on commitments, displaying persistence, attention to detail, and setting high standards matched most closely with success on the job.

The truth is, most of us would rather have the rock-star surgeon available if we needed a coronary bypass operation irrespective of the individual's bedside manner. Having a great bedside manner would be a definite plus, but our critical requirement would be to work with a medical technician with the best possible expertise and track-record for delivering results.

I believe that nice leaders don't want anybody feeling bad and so will always find something to compliment. Effective leaders will tell you what you need to know to be a high performer, even when the message is that your current activities or behavior are screwing things up.

Nice leaders will often stretch their teams across multiple priorities attempting to do all things to satisfy their constituents;

while effective leaders have learned the importance to saying . . . "No!"

Nice leaders don't enforce the rules if there is any danger of someone getting upset. Effective leaders know that leaving weak people on a team means that the results will be detrimental to the entire group.

Nice leaders don't engage in difficult conversations intended to change unacceptable behavior. Effective leaders know that pushing people to be their best, honestly pointing out their strengths and their weaknesses, and confronting issues as soon as they surface makes for colleagues that are far happier in the long run.

To be the best you can be as a leader, you need always act and behave in a manner that is not centered around a desire to be admired or look good, but is in the best interests of helping your people succeed – even when it is not easy and **especially when it is not nice.**

When Leaders Need To Help Underperformers

When someone on your team is not "pulling their weight," the desire to avoid conflict causes many leaders to waste a lot of time and personal energy trying to rationalize, rather than correct, the problem. The result is all too often to let the individual off the hook.

Another common mistake in dealing with underperformance is rushing to talk to the underperformer without pausing to consider why he or she is underperforming. At a recent meeting of leaders, they were asked to list the common reasons why their colleagues underperform.

Here's their list:

1. Trouble at home or other personal problems (divorce, alcoholism, depression, etc.)

2. "Burnout": no longer finding the work interesting or challenging

3. Lack of competency

4. Fear of failure in trying something new and reaching for career progress

5. Quality of life choice - lack of desire to contribute more energy or time to the business

6. Externally driven reasons such as the loss of a recent client or downturn in their sector

7. Failure to keep up in their field; being less in demand

8. Struggling because of poor time management or other inefficiencies

9. Lack of knowledge about what they should be doing to succeed

10. Being poorly managed

11. Insecurity due to things like firm merger discussions, and being withdrawn into their shell, pending resolution of unresolved firm issues

As you review this list, add any other possible causes that you think are missing, and then ask yourself: which of these reasons are the most common in your real world?

This particular collection of leaders selected: burnout, loss of enthusiasm, quality of life choices, personal/family issues, and externally driven market changes as the major reasons for underperformance in their groups.

One of our participants said:

It all ties together. The work is so demanding, and it is so hard on you, that the result is that you ultimately say, "I just don't like to do this anymore." That can also spill over into personal and family issues, and it can also make you say you really want a different quality of life.

The reason people are not performing is rarely because they don't know what to do. Nor is it that they don't want to do it. The incentives to do it are probably there. If they aren't doing what they should, it is probably due to something deeply personal in their lives. The only way to find out what it is, and to deal with it, is to talk about it.

Ask first. Start responding later.

Very often we just rush into assumptions about why people are unproductive. Your leadership task is to figure out for each person, as an individual, which reasons for underperformance

exist. You must accomplish that before you can formulate any appropriate counseling response. There is no point in talking about the meaningfulness of your group's work if the problem is family trouble. You've got to have a discussion, trying to find out what's going on.

Say something like . . .

"I don't want to get things wrong, but I get the sense that you're not fully engaged with everything here. You don't seem to be showing the normal levels of enthusiasm you have shown in the past. Something is going on.   I would love to help you if I can. Is there anything I can do?"

It is important to remember that the goal is to convey a genuine concern: "*How can I help you*?" while leaving the responsibility for improvement with the individual concerned.

No leader would tell you that this is an easy part of the job. **It isn't!**

Avoid Tolerating Mediocrity

Mediocrity can insidiously work its way through every nook and cranny in your firm. The symptoms are numerous: from aimless meetings that begin late to an acceptance of missed deadlines; from commitments that have little follow-up to surreptitious dialogue in the form of whispers and rumors; from reports long on flash but short on substance to failures to confront individual underperformance.

In a culture of mediocrity, complaining, blaming and offering excuses - "what we ought to do . . ." quickly replaces accountability.   Lethargy and complacency replaces action. Reactivity and defensiveness replaces initiative and risk.

Constantly fight "hardening of the oughteries."

Another symptom of mediocrity is the way people hang on to wasteful, useless working routines. People stoically tolerate the daily grind of destructive marriages rather than risking any significant alteration of the status quo. In a similar fashion, immersion in busy work allows people to escape the hard questions, such as *"What am I doing that really adds value to the firm*?" or *"Would my clients, if they saw me, happily pay for me to do what I am doing today*?"

There is no shortage of mediocrity.

The truly successful firm always displays some form of eminence, a measure of distinction, merit or virtue that transcends the

ordinary. Striving to be the best demands a pledge to be better, to do better, and to accomplish more. As an effective leader you must continually communicate the message that we are the best and are an elite corps.

Create infectious optimism and radiate confidence.

Pay attention when someone has a performance problem.

You owe it to those who are striving to be their best. Unaddressed deficiencies can have a negative effect on every member of your team. By dealing with performance issues as early as possible, you can prevent them from growing more serious, and more distasteful for both you and your other colleagues to face.

An important lesson for me to discover, was that unlike a good wine, performance problems never get better with age.

Provide hands-on, one-to-one coaching.

Investigate each deficiency to uncover its root cause. If the issue stems from a lack of skills, arrange for skill building remedial action with either formal training or senior mentoring. If there is an obstacle to performance, explore what can be done to eliminate it. If it is a personal problem of some sensitive nature, show support and follow through with further meetings to discuss the person's progress.

If you believe the professional can perform properly but just is not doing so, review the firm's expectations with them and hold them accountable . . . or help them find a position somewhere else, more suited to their disposition.

Don't Forget Your Star Performers

There is an interesting phenomenon that I've noticed about where leaders tend to direct their one-on-one coaching efforts.

Leaders often spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on the bottom 20% of their professionals, those I have crassly come to label your 'energy vampires.' These are the members of your team who seem to exhibit a consistent propensity to demand continual attention. These are also the colleagues who may never prove to be able or willing to meet firm standards or ever accomplish what you know they are capable of producing.

How do you detect an energy vampire? Posing that question to a group of leaders we developed the following list.

An energy vampire is some professional who . . .

- blames others or uncontrollable circumstances for their unacceptable performance or behavior;
- rarely executes on those promises made to the group;
- is usually defensive and never accepts personal responsibility;
- is constantly disruptive, uncommunicative or disrespectful of colleagues;
- is combative and creates conflict and tension within the team;
- may ask for yours and others' opinions but regularly rejects those views when given; and
- acts as though he or she were a victim.

Meanwhile, these same leaders will often confess that they devote minimal coaching time or attention to their best performers – that 20% at the top end who are contributing the most to your group or your firm's success.

Why does this pattern occur?

Your star performers appear, most often, to be self-sufficient so there is this sense that you should just leave them well enough alone and let them get things done. However you are missing a couple of opportunities to contribute significant added-value to your team.

Firstly, while you may assume that your stars are self-sufficient, we all encounter frustrations and hurdles in our day-to-day work and efforts to complete important projects. The degree to which you can inquire, acknowledge and remove some of those frustrations can make for a huge contribution.

Secondly, you may be failing to recognize that these diligent colleagues welcome your deliberate feedback and appreciate being recognized. Time spent staying in contact with your stars and helping them serve as a role model to others can serve to amplify their performance and practices throughout your group.

In addition . . . Be a "Star Catcher."

Leaders can, and often do invariably ensnare themselves in the trap of looking only for problems and failures to be fixed, rather than seeing successes needing to be replicated, emulated and multiplied. Focusing predominantly on problems and failures encourages your people to become overly cautious. It does almost nothing to encourage success, especially at the vital task of regularly innovating slightly new ways to do something better.

The most effective leaders go to great lengths to regularly,

obsessively, and enthusiastically point out individual's successes and positively reinforce those accomplishments. They make extraordinary efforts to stimulate more numerous future successes by promoting current successes. They accord particular recognition, often with great fanfare to individual and group demonstrations of commitment.

Regularly, catch people doing things right and recognize them for it. Make recognition self-perpetuating by recognizing those who recognize others. Remember: what gets recognized gets reinforced, and what gets reinforced gets repeated

Be sure each team member shares in the recognition for any group achievements. Develop your personal list of at least a dozen different ways to recognize others for their performance and contributions. This is not phony flattery. That pat-on-the-back because "they told you at some management training course to do some positive reinforcement stuff" is pointedly . . . not the point! Be sincere in your efforts. Praise should be reserved for instances that deserve it.

Look especially for small, desired, doable actions to recognize . The focus should be on reinforcing some professional's act of courtesy to a client, or a support staff going the extra mile on some project that they had been given. Recognize those individually minor acts, which if repeated by everyone, will add up to superb firm results.

Above all, make sure to recognize good tries, not just successes.

Well intentioned efforts that do not work out are just as important as the winners. A criticism, no matter how constructive, seems to have tenfold the effect of a compliment. So keep your ratio of compliments to complaints above 10:1 individually and collectively.

In The Trenches With Your Teams

Best Practices Aren't Always Best

I was taken back the other day by an article wherein the author, a law firm consultant, was promoting the concept of best practices. His proposition was that "the attaining of best practice can lead to a competitive advantage in which true excellence becomes a winning competitive formula." It all sounded so compelling. He then suggested that professional service firms should engage (obviously with this particular consultant) in a *'best practice make-over'* to concentrate on getting your firm to an improved operational state.

Doing a bit of research, I discovered that this idea probably had its origins in a book entitled, "*How to renovate your business: the information best practice makeover that really works.*" So get ready for it. Here comes the newest consulting trend, best practice makeovers!

These days you hear a lot about the quest for best practices in all areas. I have a biased view in that I think "best practices" is one of today's most overused terms. Anyone discussing what needs to be done to improve some given situation will often use the term, as though to justify the safety in taking action. So, what is it about the term, 'best practices' that makes it sound so persuasive, and yet why don't they always seem to work as well as some are suggesting?

I've had a few questions come to mind over the years that I believe are worth considering:

• How do you know that what is labeled a best practice even works?

Sometimes an approach to achieving something is then framed as a best practice. But when critically examining any approach our first question should be "Did it work?"

For any practice to become a good practice, it needs to be shown to be effective in the real world. For example, I'm told that when you undertake a website optimization initiative, it's vital that you test and retest the things you want to change to determine what will work best in your unique set of circumstances. To become a best practice, it needs to be seen as the most effective approach to accomplishing a goal, in a repeatable fashion over a large sample.

• And how long does it take for a certain technique to be deemed better than others?

Best practice has come to refer to the most preferred way of performing a certain task or tackling a particular challenge, as opposed to any other way. But who decides the best practices and how long does it take for a certain technique to be deemed better than any other? Does what constitutes a best practice shift over a period of time?

The business world once moved at a significantly slower pace, a pace that may have made emulating best practices prudent. However, things no longer move so slowly. By the time firms identify a best practice today, the situation that warranted the development or implementation of the best practice might have changed or may no longer be present. How long does it take for a best practice to be deposed from its throne of supremacy? The ambiguity of the answers to these questions leads one to question the validity of what is deemed a best practice.

• Do best practices have you committed to the past?

Should firm leaders focus on developing best practices, which are based upon the past, or should they be thinking ahead?

When we limit ourselves to the best that others are doing, we blind ourselves to the reality that our world is constantly changing, that the best practices of today may become quickly obsolete. As examples, we only need look at how the music & publishing industries continue to cling to outmoded business models as digital transformation becomes commonplace.

• How do you know that you have identified the real best practice?

One of my learnings from researching how organizations are using best practices is to discover that it 'isn't what you see, it's why you see it' that can make something a best practice driver.

For example, Peters and Waterman, authors of *In Search of Excellence* later declared that MBWA, "managing by walking around," was not the real excellence issue. It's why the managers of excellent companies spent a lot of time in direct contact with their people that made them excellent. The fact that we give examples of communicative practices or processes can be a misleading paradox. The point is, your organization's belief in the importance of communication is more important than any communicative act itself. The belief that drives the process is the real best practice.

• How do you know that what masquerades as a best practice isn't an exaggeration?

In a number of instances, the specific initiative that someone touted as a best practice, is discovered to be nothing more than a gross exaggeration. In one of my articles entitled, *Competitive Plagiarism*, I detail how journalist interviews with firm leaders and

others often incite people to misstate the true facts of what has worked or not in their firms.

• If a best practice works, how do you know it will work in your firm?

I think that many people believe that following what is labeled a best practice, acts as insurance against criticism if it doesn't work. There's nothing wrong with identifying and comparing different approaches to solving problems or satisfying business requirements. We don't need to reinvent the wheel or repeat mistakes that others have made.

BUT, what if - your client base is different and you operate on a different geographic platform. In today's world when everything is dynamic, even if some approach or practice did work, how do you know that it will work in your firm, with your culture, and with your people, facing your circumstances. What constitutes "best practices" is probably **unique** to each firm.

• Why is it that we're always looking for the simplest solution?

Searching for best practice is often akin to wanting to find the secret sauce – some easy answer to our perplexing firm management issues. When we then latch onto some other firm's approach, we may have simply deluded ourselves into thinking that there is some simple solution available. Often, people wonder why they should invest time in reinvention when someone has already done the task for them. Thus, best practices can, perhaps inadvertently, become an excuse for reluctance to innovate where required.

This brings us to another interesting question - Is it possible to adhere to a best practice without losing the spirit of innovation?

• Do best practices set a bar on future innovation?

One of the observable shortcomings to accepting best practices is that it sets a standard that can then cause people to aim for that benchmark and never strive to do something even better or innovative. They stop once they reach the best practice. When that happens best practice actually stifles creativity, insight and doing things differently.

Mike McLauglin and I have long had a mutual admiration for each others work and he kindly sent me a copy, some time back, of his book *Winning The Professional Services Sale* which I heartily recommend reading. I also came across a piece about Best Practices that Mike penned and wanted to share an excerpt with you:
It's tough to pinpoint when copying some other law firm's tactics morphed into "adopting best practices," but somewhere along the line it did. The notion that an organization can transplant the ideas of another has become so widespread that it's no wonder so many professional firms look remarkably alike.

Of course, there is value in learning from others' experience and success. It's natural to look at how another firm (especially a competitor) created a new market opportunity. Many firms face the same kinds of challenges, so applying others' tested strategies and tactics often seems like the ultimate shortcut to salvation. But too often, following others' practices results in wasted investment and disappointment when the results fall short of their original application. Here are four reasons you should dump best practices:

They rarely work.
A firm's best practices–however widely admired–function in the context of its particular organization's processes, culture, systems, and people. Plucking a practice from the situation that brought it

forth and trying to graft it onto another firm produces results that are by no means guaranteed.

It's a follower's strategy.
In an era when clients demand creativity and innovation, why follow someone else's lead? In the long run, relying on best practices will doom you to mediocrity. Instead of getting bogged down trying to reverse-engineer the strategies of others, find your own path. Be the leader, not the follower.

Change comes from within.
People rarely respond well to implementing some other firm's ideas. In fact, best practices that come from on high usually cause resentment. Let people create their own solutions using their in-depth knowledge of your firm's clients, suppliers, employees, and processes. That will result in ownership of the ideas and determination to get results.

They don't come with a manual.
Business books and benchmark reports are full of snippets about best practices, but they rarely explain what to do with them.

The problem with best practices is this: Using them as a guide lulls people into thinking that a practice already exists, tested and ready, and can be successfully transplanted. When you import a practice, thoughts immediately turn to how to implement that practice, when you should instead focus on what needs to be done and why. If you begin with a predetermined solution, you're more likely to overlook innovative ideas right under your nose.

The best use of the so-called best practices is as generator of ***next practices*** – new ideas and new possibilities that you might be able to take in, digest, and adopt to your situation. It's a lot like the typical business school case; it is not intended as a recipe to be followed, but rather as an example of what other people did.

The Secret Sauce: Being Distinct Is Better

Strategic wisdom has it that you need to identify what you can do really well if you're going to best the competition. This is important advice, but it's not sufficient. Often your core competency is the same one your competitor has. One misstep that firm leaders often make is competing with rivals by doing the very same things. You get into trouble when you attempt to compete head-on with other competitors. No one wins in that kind of protracted struggle.

You need to develop a clear strategy around developing a differentiated position in your marketplace. So unless your competency is seen as markedly better in your clients' eyes, you have no meaningful differentiation, ***zip advantage, nada uniqueness.***

The key to marketplace uniqueness is having some distinct capability or attribute that makes you clearly superior to competitors.

Consider . . .

• You need to **FOCUS**.

In today's market you need to be disciplined and incredibly focused. Resources are limited and clients are discriminating. Be vigilant about what new trends are emerging, how the marketplace is evolving and how you'll stay ahead of it. It's not

about building size. It's about dominating selective micro-niches. Dominate or leave. It is very rare to see a successful 'fast follower.'

• You need to **INNOVATE**.

Embrace profound innovation. Push yourself to discover what you can do to mobilize your partners and inspire your clients. Ask: Is it extraordinary? Does it matter to clients? Does it provide enhanced value?

• You need to **STREAMLINE**.

Restructure your processes – be lean and simplified. Figure out how long it takes your firm to: make a decision, launch a new legal service, get a client's deal completed, or get an account out the door. Now chop each number in half and force yourself to do it faster.

• You need to **LEAD**.

Move from responding to leading; from being responsive to being proactive. Smart firms aren't just responding to new trends and developments. They are leading them. Lead your clients to an entirely new market space. If your clients are asking for it, it's not uncharted territory anymore. You're already too late.

Every day, in every meeting, with every decision, leaders must ask themselves, "*Is this merely a good operational practice or is this something that's improving on my strategic distinction*?"

You must keep asking, "*How can we deliver a unique value to meet an important set of needs for an important set of our clients*?"

Your distinct competency is the secret sauce, the get-out-of-jail-free card, the force-field that yields more and better business. It may be difficult to achieve, but I can think of no other objective more worthy for you to be exploring in the trenches with your team!

Your Team Can Never Be Something The Leader Is Not

When one thinks about the words most closely associated with "leader" you might very well think of terms like catalyst, trailblazer, executive or visionary. Now if you then ask a respected firm leader, with some years of experience, what words are most closely associated, you are likely to hear terms like coach, servant, facilitator and friend.

Whether in service to your firm as a firm leader or even someone who has the responsibility for heading up a team, by now you will have heard all of the common clichés about how the job of working with and managing other professionals is akin to being the only fire hydrant on a street of dogs, like lighting your hair and then putting the fire out with a hammer, like nailing jello to the wall, pushing string across a table, or (the one I like most) "like herding cats."

The performance of any firm is primarily driven by the performance of those holding leadership responsibilities. From my research and work with the best leaders it is evident that the essential quality of any individual in this position is the ability to . . . inspire others to accomplish more then they might otherwise have accomplished had they not been in the picture.

"At the end of the day, if you haven't helped others improve at what they do, you have wasted your time!"

Since the job of being a leader is to help your colleagues become even more successful, firms want someone who has a consistent

track record for being generous with their time on behalf of others, even if it is not in their own short-term best interests. True leaders find ways to make their colleagues feel important and are visibly seen moving around the firm meeting with individuals. They are seen as being approachable and they seem to spend more time with their people, at all levels, then might be reasonably expected.

A leader is that individual who is more concerned with how to make the firm "better" rather than just how to make the firm bigger; with how to develop collaborative teams, how to provide a mutually supportive environment for all of the people; and who has a concrete action plan that can deliver on those goals.

The best leaders inspire others to extraordinary efforts by ***helping people find the excitement, the challenge, the fulfillment in what they do***; that individual who really cares about their firm being recognized as being the best. They set high expectations. The best leaders see and articulate more of their peoples potential than individuals might desire for themselves.

They support the champions. They help people advance their ideas even when some power partner in the firm might be highly skeptical. And, they have a sense of fun and humor. Great leaders seem to take their job very seriously, but not themselves.

So as you look to the future, ask yourself this question:
"Am I in this position to do something, or am I in this position for something to do?"

Now, take out a piece of paper, label it "What I want to accomplish in the coming year and make a list of only those three or four highest priorities that you are ***obsessive about achieving*** during the coming months.

Keep a written journal (paper or electronic) of your thoughts, ideas, and improvement efforts.

The Myth of Visionary Leadership

The other day I came across yet another article, by yet another supposed leadership expert, that prescribes that to be a truly great firm leader you need to develop and communicate a vision. And, while almost every book on leadership suggests that a true leader needs to have a vision (with more than 400 books listed under "Visionary Leadership" on Amazon) I think it is nice in theory, sounds profoundly intelligent as a concept, but is absolute nonsense in its application for you leading a team of highly talented professionals.

I believe one aspect of how "having a vision" is nice in theory, was confirmed by the interviews conducted of 150 managing partners by my U.K. colleague Rob Lees, co-author of When Professionals Have to Lead. Rob related to me this one example from his findings:

The managing partner of one of the firms we talked to explained how he had come back from Harvard Business School's Leading Professional Service Firms program with renewed energy and a determination to drive the firm forward. So, he outlined his vision of moving the firm from its regional base to becoming a leading national firm to his partners and talked about what they needed to do to get there. But, to his abject disappointment, nothing happened. To the partners, the vision was just too aspirational; achievable only through a merger, which they felt they would be on the wrong side of. Concerned about the lack of action, the managing partner visited all of the offices to talk through the plans and, during these visits, the partners' concerns surfaced.

Whither The Mission Statement?
Meanwhile, in his book [Great by Choice](), Jim Collins tells us that his findings dismiss several closely held business world beliefs . . . such as the notion that successful leaders are "bold, risk-seeking visionaries." Rather, Collins concludes that the most successful leaders are "disciplined," "empirical" and "paranoid," building on verifiable results and constantly anticipating what could go wrong.

Remember mission statements?

Mission statements first came into vogue in the 1990s. A single-page document filled with more platitudes than you'd find in the average prayer book, spelling out your firm's business mission. No one remembered the darn things, it was business as usual, and the document didn't have the profound impact on the fortunes of firms that their creators had hoped for. The mission statement exercise was quickly forgotten – except at those few firms who chose to have them laminated as cards for everyone to keep in their wallet.

I am not aware of one single firm that has invested partner time in articulating a mission or vision statement that has actually been implemented.

Then we were informed on how every firm needs "a vision" to succeed.

It was a new name, but quickly became the same old silly exercise. All your skeptical partners exchange winks and knowing glances. The Executive Committee will have to be indulged one more time. In all cases the result was to be the same – having a vision changed nothing! I am not aware of one single firm (and certainly not among those achieving above-average market performance) that has invested partner time in articulating a

mission or vision statement that has actually been implemented.

And I have for years had the audacity to challenged professionals at multiple conferences to please give me just one example of a professional firm, anywhere, wherein the firm leader proclaimed a vision and had all of his or her partners get excited, eager to move forward and behave in concert with that articulated vision. "Yeah, take me to the promised land!"

It may be theoretically possible, but I have yet to find one real live example.

Creating A Shared Vision

What most concerns me is seeing brand new firm leaders who just naturally struggle with trying to get a handle on the magnitude and scope of having to now lead an entire firm and being repeatedly told or reading that they are ineffective unless they have articulated their vision. Partners definitely **need** to have some sense of a shared direction – and please do notice that word "shared."

It takes me back to a very important principle that I learned early in my consulting career when a very senior statesman, a founder of a major law firm told me the one thing I needed to know about working with lawyers:

No professional ever gets excited about, enthusiastically supports, and willingly works to promote any change, any idea, any new direction or strategy – that they themselves have not been part in formulating.

That's why a shared direction needs to be facilitated by an effective leader; and why I think that telling leaders that need to articulate their personal vision, is just not a good idea.

Focus On Innovation, Not Fixing Problems

Most of us as professionals are veteran problem solvers. We are trained to resolve the issue, put out the fire, correct the underperformance, and generally "fix" the problem. There is a natural gravitational field which unconsciously moves us toward fixing things instead of improving, toward restoring instead of increasing, and toward reacting rather than being proactive.

In your firm, what is the relative percentage of time you spend fixing problems versus being innovative? If we assign 100% to the total time invested in both problem solving and innovation, what is the breakdown between each? Most firm leaders tell me that in their firm it usually breaks down to about 90% of the time spent in problem solving and 10% on innovation. That translates into any leader spending 90% of their time and energy looking backwards and fixing things, while only 10% looking forward. Firms operating in this mode will NEVER lead in their marketplace.

What are you doing to help people feel safe in letting go of today's certainties, and feel comfortable reaching out to create the momentum that will carry them toward tomorrow?

"Too much respect for problems
kills our faith in possibilities."

Innovation begins as an attitude and has to be a daily endeavor.

Fixing things simply restores the prior performance or condition, which is comfortable, but limits value. However, if your focus is on improving the condition, on being innovative, then your intent is not on restoring the status quo, but on developing a level of performance that exceeds the previous standards.

Most board, executive committee and team meetings are status reports on the present. If you are serious about promoting innovation make sure that each meeting devotes at least 25 percent of the time to reviewing trends, listening to ideas for improving systems, or exploring the development of entirely new services.

Be especially vigilant for unexpected and unplanned successes. Dig deeper to understand the unanticipated results. Often you will find "happy accidents," chance changes or highly effective championing behavior. These are key sources of innovation.

Actively seek out people, whether fellow colleagues, internal professionals or staff, who are championing some small innovation. Even if you do not personally agree with a specific innovation, ensure that everyone knows that you support the creative thinking that is going on. I fondly remember hearing Peter Drucker, the late Father of Modern Management, say: "*Nothing of much significance happens in any organization without a **mono-maniac with a mission**!*"

So, how many experiments, tests and pilot projects are currently underway in your firm? And if there aren't any happening . . . why not?

Consider setting targets for innovation. Consider even initiating an innovators' "Hall of Fame" within your firm. Some firms now measure performance by the percentage of revenues that come from new service offerings that did not exist 3 years ago.

Three Little Questions
To Stimulate Innovation

In a recent Webinar I participated in, I was asked, "*From your experience, what one key thing is central to stimulating innovation in professional service firms*?"

If I had to choose only one thing, and at first blush it may seem simplistic, it would have to be shaping your firm's culture to embrace innovation. And obviously, it has to start at the top – with your leadership and the work you are doing with your team. The way I think about culture is that it's all wrapped up in our habits (meaning, what behaviors are we prepared to tolerate) and our language (specifically, how do we use language to shape our collective thinking).

For example, in an earlier life, I was a Vice-President and Director of a Canadian-based, public company in the telecommunications industry. I had the good fortune of working with a rather progressive, very successful CEO who held some very strong beliefs. One of those beliefs, that he preached to all of his senior team, repeatedly, was that upon first being presented with any idea or proposed course of action – he would say,

"*You have 'no intellectual integrity voicing a personal opinion that suggests that you know whether it will work or not – because the reality is that you do NOT know, for certain*."

"*And even if that same idea has been tried before – say, only last year – in this firm or some other firm and failed; that still is not determinative of whether the idea will fail here and now*"

He taught us that you only display intellectual integrity by asking and answering three sequential questions:

#1 NOT: Will this work? BUT: **How do we make this work?** (which you will notice provokes a whole different mindset). He believed you start with a focus on "possibility" not "profitability"

#2 **What is the worst that could happen?** (let's be realistic, where might the crap hit the fan); and finally,

#3 **Where is my backdoor if the worst that could happen, happens?**

Unfortunately, winning the debate, arguing well, finding the slightest little flaw in the ideas of others is often the behavior that seems to be held in great esteem within our firms. And allowing that behavior rarely builds trust or inspires innovation. So to shape a culture that embraces innovation, I believe you need to starts with making it socially unacceptable to EVER offer an immediate opinion on whether any new idea will work.

In fact, with a number of the practice groups that I have worked with, they have, with my encouragement, adopted a group protocol (a rule for self-governing their collective behavior) that simply states:

"*we all agree that in our group, we will LOVE every new idea . . . for five minutes!*"

Create Your 'Stop Doing' List

Many new leaders severely underestimate the time that is going to be required of them to really do their job.

In fact, a recent Citibank/HBR Client Advisory, provided a commentary under the title: *The Leadership Challenge*. According to the report,

"One development which gives us concern is that some of the newer breed of leaders continue to maintain busy, full time practices. In this scenario, their clients' needs are likely to take priority, to the detriment of the management of the firm. If we could see any change, it would be that firms recognize that to be effective, the firm leader is best performed as a full time role."

Indeed, the biggest issue I hear about is always the amount of time it takes to do the *leadership stuff*. Many are not full-time team leaders so they struggle with trying to maintain some balance between the time needed to manage their group and the time required to maintain some modest personal practice.

Here's one tip that I've been talking about for some time now: Create a ***Stop Doing*** **List**.

Take a look at your desk. If you're like most hard-charging leaders, you've got a very lengthy and well-articulated to-do list. We've all been told that leaders make things happen – and that's true. But it's also true that great leaders distinguish themselves by their unyielding discipline to stop doing anything and everything that doesn't fit. And that's not easy. We all get a

personal sense of satisfaction every time we check something off of our to-do list.

Our only failing is that the things that we are checking off are the easy tasks, like perhaps responding to some email, and probably not the things that will advance our personal strategic goals as firm leader or significantly change the firm. There is where the urgent crowds out the important!

So how can you go about re-focusing your To-Do list?

Start with making your usual to-do list and list the items in some priority from those that are likely to have the greatest impact on advancing your strategic goals to those that are least impactful.

Now draw a line about halfway through your list marking the lower listed tasks as your 'Stop Doing" items. Recognizing that you initially identified those tasks for a reason, the point here is to force you to apply some discipline to now thinking about those items.

Your first obvious strategy is to **just not do it**.

Make a decision that you are not going to spend time on some of these issues. Perhaps the issue will simply resolve itself. In any case, you make the decision that you will not be taking action on those particular items at this time.

The second strategy is **to delay or postpone**.

Sometimes a delaying tactic will result in you reevaluating the importance of some to-do item – is this task really as critical as it once seemed? Occasionally, someone from within your team will recognize that it is important for him or her to take the action needed to complete the task. Other times, the situation will shift and the need for action goes away. In an article I authored,

entitled *Firm Leadership Is NOT For Wimps!* I identified how some of the best leaders I've met periodically engage in what I would call, "purposeful deferment." They operate on the principle of never making a decision today that can reasonably put off until tomorrow. And I'm not being uncomplimentary.

Whenever requested to make a decision they would first ask, *"How much time do I have?"* In other words, is it essential that the decision be made now, in a day, next week or within the year? These leaders have wisely discerned that if a particular task or decision can be reasonably delayed for a short while than circumstances may change – an adversary may leave the firm, a competitor stumble, or an advantageous new development emerge.

That, of course, can be a hard choice for action-oriented leaders to make. As we know, the bias for taking action is both a strength and a weakness. The truth is that waiting can work.

Your last technique for dealing with your Stop Doing list is to **delegate**.

If an item is too important to defer, but still doesn't rank in the top half of your personal list, it could be a great one to delegate. Find the right person inside or outside your team that can best attend to this task.

People are generally flattered when you, as the leader, have asked for their help. What may be a non-strategic task to you can still be an interesting assignment for someone else. This gives you two benefits: Your item gets checked off and you have contributed to someone's professional development.

Give this technique a try. With regular discipline, you can keep those seemingly urgent but non-important and non-strategic issues that find their way onto your To-Do list, either eliminated or delegated.

The Hurdles to Initiating Change

Wherever you look within the profession, you will see two kinds of firms: laggards who have fallen behind the change curve, and challengers who are in front of the curve or at least at the leading edge of it. The laggards fail to see the future coming. They fall out of the driver's seat. They cede the role to somebody else and then fight to catch up.

There are reasons, if not excuses, for many firms not to take action. From their early days in school, professionals were rewarded for success and still are today, based on their ability to look backward in history – to find precedent, to find the experience-based rule that will control the adjudication of the situation at hand. The need for change is not welcomed and the more dramatic the change required, the more acute the resistance from nostalgic past-worshippers. In order to take decisive action, most firms have some acute change hurdles to overcome – hurdles I have come to label: denial, perfectionism, precedent, competence, and agility.

The debilitating effects of denial.

Many firms are in denial and the few that aren't, move very slowly.

If your firm gets caught behind the curve, it wasn't because critical trends weren't visible; it was because they were ignored. The huge challenge remains, that for too many firms, unless there is acute "pain" there is little incentive to change. History proves that laggards only grab for the new once they are totally convinced the old doesn't work anymore.

And the old does NOT work anymore!

When does a firm's strategy change: usually only in response to a crisis or because of the initiative of a new firm leader. In many firms we have a generation of stewards rather than entrepreneurs. The power of denial is most prevalent in what you do, when you don't know how to profitably grow. So a firm's typical response becomes let's do more of what we have been doing, or let's cut costs, or let's just merge.

The handicap of perfection.

One of the biggest drawbacks to embracing change or innovation is the professional mindset and desire to get things just right, the very first time. This may be a highly desirable trait in your work on behalf of clients. If you are a lawyer preparing pleadings in litigation or an accountant preparing an audit report, it is essential to have a watertight document – that is what your client is paying for.

Unfortunately, many professionals approach many performance and management issues in exactly the same way, striving for perfection from the outset and unwilling to go public until they are entirely happy. The downside of this approach is that opportunities are lost as other firms steal the advantage and the limelight with their own initiatives.

Today, we operate in a rapidly evolving market, where firms are going to have to reinvent themselves and their business models. So rather than striving for perfection, it is better to launch a limited risk field trial, a pilot project, and as soon as possible – then modify, adjust, revamp and fine-tune . . . on the fly.
In other words, better to take action, throw the competition into disarray – then worry about ironing out every wrinkle. The shape

of any new initiative can change dramatically, over time, as your efforts begin to generate valuable feedback.

The threat of precedent.

*"If the medical profession was based on precedent,
we would still be using leeches."*

Anyone who has ever spent time in a number of different firms has come to recognize that "how we do business around here" is rarely codified but often deeply rooted within the subtleties of the firm's culture, operating style, and campfire stories. This behavior, over time, can become an intellectual straightjacket as the firm misses out on exploiting opportunities due to blindspots caused by its reliance on history and precedent. The last seven words of a dying firm are often, "we've never done it that way before."

For those who built the firm's past successes, the temptation to preserve the status quo can be overwhelming. The battle is not globalism versus regionalism, it is innovation versus precedent.

Strategy requires making choices. But it's not good enough just to be different. You've got to be different in ways that involve trade-offs with other ways of being different. The trouble is that professional firms hate making choices, because doing so always looks dangerous and limiting. They always want the best of all worlds.

It is psychologically risky to narrow your range of services, to narrow the range of prospects you are targeting. But we all instinctively know that a firm simply cannot be all things to all people and do a very good job of it. Gone are the days of trying to be all things to all clients. Here are the days of having a few signature practice areas with corollary supporting specialties.

The danger of competence.

Professionals are understandably discomforted when faced with the fact that the intellectual capital accumulated over a lifetime may be of little value in a radically changing environment.

Competence is the enemy of change. Many professionals get locked into a successful mode of behavior and in some cases, arrogant manner. They are the ones who will do everything in their power to fight change because they are in love with the status-quo.
Competent professionals resist change because change threatens to make them less competent. Competent professionals like being competent – that is who they are and sometimes that is all they've got. Just think of the risks that come with embracing anything new. A fresh approach to serving clients – one that would prevent me from maximizing my billable hours and force me to be more productive and practice differently. No wonder they're in no hurry to rock the boat.

Many firms have atrophied in their ability to think and act strategically. I consistently evidence short-term thinking. It's all about immediate results. Too many firms seem to have lost the habit of investing for their future. Increasingly, the firms that will be the true leaders will be those who reshape and redefine their profession.

The over-reliance on agility.

"*The world changes*," says the managing partner of one prominent professional services firm. "*And an institution like this, which has been around for over a hundred years, survives and thrives because it is able to adapt to the changes that take place.*"

And I say, "*Good luck.*"

Most believe that they can quickly adapt if anything dramatic finally manifests itself. And agility is great, but if you become nothing more than agile you will remain a perpetual follower – and even fast followers find few spoils.

The goal is not to speculate on what might happen,

but to imagine what you could make happen.

Dare To Be First.

"The first one to the future has the best view. There is no limit to what can be accomplished when you keep looking beyond the horizon. Not just to see what's coming next, but to create it."

Those are the headlines from an advertisement once sponsored by Hughes Electronics Corporation. And never has a message been so appropriate for the professions.

In summary, it's time for all of us to take responsibility for our destiny, time to stop whining about the challenges of a low-demand economy; time to focus energy on applying the skills and knowledge required to enhance our odds of winning in this hypercompetitive world of professional services.

_____

Eight Undeniable Truths About Change

If your firm wants to initiate any kind of change, you need to recognize and deal with some basic and undeniable truths. These are things that can't be avoided or changed (ironic), but can be mitigated, leveraged and worked with – to enable change with more ease and less tears.

1. Commitment to the past hinders change in the future.

Like a tree's roots, our hold on the way we do things grows deeper over time. The success or failure of changes in the past, your colleagues' appetite for growth, and the culture of your team all help determine how deep the roots go and how hard it will be to change.

2. Effective communication demands quality and quantity.

Effective communication is critical during any change effort. Honesty, organization, consistency and responsiveness all will help ensure that communications are supporting the change. You can say that again . . . and again . . . and again . . . and again!

3. Your actions always speak louder than your words.

What you do and say has far more influence over the success or failure of a change than anything else. Your colleagues are constantly watching you (not just in scripted moments) for cues.

4. People support what they help create.

The movie "Field of Dreams" was close but not exactly right. It is not, "If you build it, they will come," but rather, "If they build it, they will come." No one ever gets excited about, enthusiastic for or willingly supports any direction, strategy or change . . . that they themselves have not had a part in formulating. Your people inherently connect with something they help build. Engaging your colleagues in the change effort, early on, will pay big dividends in the long run.

5. Firms change only when the people within the firm change.

It truly does take a village. All professional service firms are, in essence, teams of people. If your firm is going to change, a critical mass of the partners within your firm need to go through an individual change process – first.

6. Resistance is inevitable.

You probably heard it first back in your high school physics class, when Newton said it . . . "*An object at rest tends to stay at rest*." There are personal, structural and physiological reasons to resist change. Firms that expect and deal with resistance proactively will experience the most effective changes.

7. Connecting to the head and the heart builds commitment.

In spite of being highly analytical, your colleagues are not purely rational. They need to have a rational recognition of the need to change, as well as a deeper emotional connection to believe in what the change is all about. Winning the hearts of those who will experience the change will make all the difference.

8. Sustaining change takes support and reinforcement.

As your firm changes, you are not in Kansas anymore. Those that make change stick make sure they are hiring, training, developing, measuring, rewarding and communicating with people in ways consistent with the new model rather than the old practices.

———————————————

The Most Common & Wrong Approach To Change

I was reading a piece the other day wherein the author lamented that professionals have a lack of interest in change. While I won't take issue with the validity of that statement, I do find it fascinating how we continue to subscribe to a model for leading change that simply doesn't work.

What model? Well it goes something like this . . .

We begin by (unconsciously) trying to overwhelm our colleagues with data – facts, statistics, figures, flowcharts in amongst our rousing speeches to let them know why we must, as a successful firm, adapt to new market changes. We like to think that the facts (as we perceive them) will convince our partners to change – that our colleagues are essentially rational if given accurate information. We believe that if we provide relevant data about the issue, make a sound business case for what needs to be done and present our recommendations, our colleagues will act quickly and forcefully.

If our colleagues have doubts or disagree (and you can be assured that they will), we take that as a clear sign that we haven't yet done a good job of presenting the evidence. So, when our colleagues don't immediately get on-board with any suggested course of action, we push the idea. We try harder to persuade them. We try to give them stronger data. We keep doing the same thing only more of it. And, we TURN UP the volume. We explain it over and over again. (After all, the communications

experts tell us that you can never over-communicate your message!)

In escalating our efforts, we take more and more ownership of the problem. To get people on-board, we are told that we need to "create a burning platform" – a sense of urgency, so that our colleagues will take the need to change seriously. We therefore, present our facts with an emphasis on the dire consequences for our partners in not doing what we want them to do.

"If we don't get serious about developing our knowledge management capabilities, we are definitely going to lose clients . . . we may even see a significant drop in revenues"

While fear may occasionally serve as a short-term motivator, at an emotional level, urgency and fear are close cousins. Our colleagues may well react to our fervor by becoming even more resistant. They rarely (if ever) respond with appreciation for our tenacity. Instead, we find that a number of them are either getting angry or simply tuning out whenever we talk. As we continue to push, resistance increases in direct proportion to our actions.

The problem is that this commonly used approach seldom works.

If you think about it, it is build upon the assumption that you are right and those of your partners who "*simply don't get it*" or "*don't see the light*" are wrong. Unfortunately, this approach all too often turns the exchange into a contest over whose idea or beliefs will win.

And think about this . . . how often have you won and actually realized change using this approach?

Seven Advantages To Having A Sounding Board

Do you have a confidant in whom you can discuss your burning issues - your own personal leadership sounding board?

With the pace of business today the pressure has never been higher, or the temptation greater to act just for the sake of moving things off your pending pile and appearing decisive. This kind of 'shoot from the hip' style may make us feel confident that we are getting somewhere. However, you are usually dealing with complex, multi-faceted issues that require more consideration. This is where I often find leaders can gain significant value from working with an external 'sounding board' – someone they respect, who they can confide in and who can challenge their thinking process.

Scheduling time with someone outside of your firm, with no axe to grind, and that you can talk freely to, about your agenda, in complete confidence, has a number of benefits:

1. It makes space for you to think things through.

It is always helpful to pause to consider whether you are planning not only to do things right, but more importantly, to do the right things! It is all too easy to get sucked into operational details and it is your job to ensure that the issues that are strategic have been properly identified and planned for. If you are not strategic in the use of your time, chances are you are not being sufficiently strategic in other areas.

2. The very act of explaining your ideas and issues to someone objective can help you clarify your own thinking.

There is a natural 'sorting' process that goes on whenever you gather together all of bits that are similar and create a clearer, more complete picture. This process helps sequence your thinking in a way that makes your overall story much more coherent and easily conveyed.

3. It gives you the chance to develop your ideas further, and if necessary, change direction completely with no loss of face, and no adverse consequences.

It is very normal for any good leader to have doubts, and it is a part of the job to explore them as honestly as possible. This is a naturally uncomfortable process and it helps to have someone support you through it.

4. It allows you to have your thinking challenged in a non-threatening environment.

In days of old, Kings had Court Jesters who had license to say exactly what they thought, as truthfulness tends to shrivel as it gets closer to power. An outsider can ask those apparently daft, but highly challenging questions such as "*Why would you want to do that*?" " *What would happen if you didn't do that*?" etc.

5. An outsider can often see when the leader is part of the problem and highlight when you might need to consider your own contribution to the situation.

An activity that can be valuably performed in this safe space is venting. Once words are spoken they cannot be unspoken and in

every team there are frustrations, doubts and fears. These can all get in the way of the smooth running of your firm. Deciding which issues are ones you need to take up with someone directly and which ones are just the result of, perhaps you having a bad day, can make you a much better person to work with.

6. It allows you to seek input from someone outside your firm's political structure and therefore not need to play power games.

This process is not about someone coming in and telling you how to run your firm, something that you are uniquely qualified to do; but rather it is to help you "get at the wisdom you already have." When this is supplemented with a little outside input it becomes a very potent dish.

7. You are able to bring in new ideas from outside your firm.

One firm leader I worked with said to me that he could only discuss a particular issue with two other people in his firm, and he already knew what they would both say, so he definitely needed a fresh perspective. This is by no means untypical.

Time spent in reflection and exploration with a trusted confidant is a good way of reducing your stress. Decisions that have been thought through inspire more confidence, and this raises your 'stock' with your colleagues and their willingness to follow your lead. In the end if you are like the firm leaders and practice leaders I have worked with, you will typically leave these discussions much more focused about what is really important to you; clear about what you need to do next; and understand where you can either afford to take action or need to delegate.

Where Is Your Leadership Attention Being Directed?

As your firm's leader, what you pay attention to determines what your colleagues perceive to be most important. It therefore follows that if you do not track what is going on outside of the walls of your firm, you may soon be caught dealing with a priority that seems urgent but is less important than the one you should be dealing with. Determining what you will pay attention to is a priority in effectively leading your team.

Here are a few challenges that you should not loose sight of:

Don't get caught with your attention firmly fixed in the rear-view mirror.

Many leaders get so caught up in the busyness of business, that they don't take a good long look at the world outside. Concurrently, your firm's executive committee members can also become consumed by these immediate issues, and firmly enmeshed in the fierce urgency of now. Yet, the uncertainty and potential impact of the future demands that we reallocate our attention – because disruptions in the client environment can disrupt our business models with lightning speed.

Uncertain client demands, encroaching competitors, and new technologies can be anticipated and managed only by routinely tracking them, even if they don't have any immediate impact on your team's performance. You and your colleagues must now spend some portion of their time reading, listening, and thinking about the clients you serve and the changes going on in their

industries. Even your senior administrative professionals should allocate some amount of their time to looking out rather than in.

Jim Collins described the highest performers, as those leaders who were always looking out the window to identify where success comes from and looking in the mirror to find the source of failure. This trait is especially valuable when dealing with an uncertain future.

Don't fail to challenge assumptions until they bleed.

Many of us often don't question our beliefs when it comes to dealing with uncertainty. We continue to assume that people will always read newspapers, buy music in stores and pay legal fees based on a billable hour model. We assume that our firms will work best with a practice group structure based on professional competencies. We assume that the United States will continue to be the global economic powerhouse and that the US dollar will continue to be the global currency.

These could be right or wrong assumptions, but for every one of us, whatever is assumed based on the past, is likely to be wrong for the future. As comfortable as it is to determine your priorities based on your past experience—and as much as it saves time and money—it is today, a deadly practice.

Don't allow hubris to cloud your view of the future.

By definition, arrogance makes you vulnerable to surprises. When you convince yourself that you have the answer—that you have a winning formula that will triumph in all circumstances – then something in the future is bound to get you. As Murphy's Law postulates, "*If something can go wrong, it will.*"

Intel's Andy Grove once insightfully suggested that "*sooner or later, something fundamental in your business world will change.*"

The future humbles us all. The challenge for everyone is to look into an uncertain future with a learner's mindset and maintain flexibility.

Signal What You Value As A Leader

One of the more profound things I've learned, that I try to pass along to leaders is to "act like you are on stage at all times, because you are!" Everything you do and say will send messages, set tone, establish expectations, and communicate direction about what is of priority to you. With that in mind, you need to carefully orchestrate what symbolic acts you may want to execute to create a lasting impression and convey what you stand for.

In other words, you need to always think through . . .

Where You Spend Your Time

The primary thing that your colleagues will always look to is where and how you spend your time. Leaders spend time on whatever issues they think are most important. Examine your day-timer. Compare it against the actual activities that consumed your time during just this past week and identify for yourself what your activity says to your colleagues about what you see as your most important priorities?

Now, what do you want 'your time spent' to say about your priorities in the coming months.

What You Inquire About

Leaders who are successful are mindful to walk the job rather than get stuck in their offices. They ask lots of questions and listen loudly. The questions you deliberately ask and the attention

those questions provoke sends a clear signal about the prevailing themes that occupy your thinking. Are the questions you want to ask of your colleagues and the topics you plan to focus in on consistent with the signals that you want to convey?

A classic and often misquoted study by Dr. Mehabrian from the University of California stated that the total impact of any message is based 7% on the words used; 38% on the volume and tone of one's voice; and fully 55% on facial expressions and other body language signals. But, Dr. Mehabrian never claimed that you could view a movie in a foreign language and accurately determine 93% of the content by simply watching people's body language.

What is important to consider as a leader, is that the non-verbal aspects of your communication will reveal to people your underlying emotions, motives and feelings. Your colleagues will evaluate the emotional content of your message, not by what you say or what you inquire about; but by *how* you say it and how you *look* when you say it.

How You Spend Your Budget

What we purposely budget for and the way in which we choose to spend our monetary resources says a lot about our priorities and our values.

What will this year's budget expenditures tell people about where you are focusing your leadership attention?

What Specifically You Measure

Usually an important indicator of what you think is important is specifically what you measure, what you generate written reports on, and what you track on a regular basis. If you say, that as a practice group or as a firm, we should be more focused on

delivering value to our clients, are you rigorous about looking for more efficient ways to execute your deals and transactions; and constantly measure improvements in efficiency? Are you measuring the quality of the services provided and the client's satisfaction?

What You Celebrate and Rebuke

Will what you publicly reward, those behaviors you identify and successes you celebrate within your firm reinforce the values and priorities that you as a leader are trying to emphasize?

When one of the colleagues takes a measured risk with the intent of benefiting the team and their actions fall short, is there a history of that individual being rewarded for their initiative or reprimanded for their failed efforts?

I'm reminded of the words of one exemplary firm leader who counseled:

"I learned that little gestures had significance. Everything you do is magnified, and you have to realize that. Even if you are a bit worn down, smile. People derive a lot of their outlook from the outlook of their leaders, and it makes them feel good if you appear in good spirits."

Six Great Leadership Nuggets I've Overheard

• When hiring candidates, ask for their operating manual.

Tell candidates: *"Imagine you're a robot. What does your manual say under 'ideal operating conditions*.'"

Once they answer, follow-up with this question: *"What does the 'warning label' say*?"

You're likely to get insightful, unpredictable and even humorous answers but this is likely to be very subtle way of gauging an individual's self-awareness and revealing their personality.

• Make speed your leadership obsession.

I have long believed that the two attributes most important to having the right professionals working along side you is having talent that has "highly attuned attention to detail" and an "fanatical sense of urgency." Many a firm leader and CEO has spoken about how speed is the ultimate competitive weapon in business. All else being equal the fastest competitor in any given market will likely win. As one CEO expressed it, *"challenge the when*!"

For my part, I continue to be absolutely amazed at just how often the best articulated plans and actions are discussed in meetings without any attention being directed to who is going to do what and by when. It's not that everything needs to be done NOW, but

for items on your critical path, it's always useful to challenge the due date. All it takes is asking the simplest question: *"Why can't this be done sooner?"*

Asking it methodically, reliably and habitually can have a profound impact on the speed of your organization

• Practice saying *"No"* real often.

As you get into a leadership position you have more people reaching out to you, more invitations to meetings, more requests for you to make a decision, more emails to read and respond to and as one leader phrased it – death by a thousand paper cuts. Saying no is not easy, especially as you want to be helpful and love to see yourself as a problem solver. But you have to draw the line somewhere.   To do this effectively, the most important thing is that you close the door to further communication. Do it nicely in a way that truthfully explains the situation, but don't leave things open-ended.

Try this:

"Great to hear from you. Unfortunately, I'm under some extreme pressure to deliver against some very ambitious goals. My sincere thanks for understanding."

• Expect to be attacked.

If you are at all effective as a leader you may expect that some people will react negatively to what you are declaring as your priorities and then begin a campaign of sabotage. In some instances their resistance will be very overt – often characterized by the obvious and verbalized messages that let you know clearly that someone is not supportive.
As frustrating as open resistance can be, the good news in these

situations is that there are no surprises. You know exactly where someone is coming from.

In other cases it will be very subtle, which may look like a smile to their face but undermining behavior behind your back. Being attacked comes with the job. Just recognize that it is not about you as much as it is about people's insecurities, people trying to measure up and just trying to merely hold on to what they have or where they are.

• Make sharing credit a part of your meeting agenda

Periodically, start off meetings with team members sharing all the good things that have happened since the last meeting.

Examples include specific acknowledgments of individuals, announcement of successes – even small ones – or expressing gratitude for the team in general. This is a quick activity that can boost morale and make it easier for those who are unaccustomed to giving or receiving appreciation.

• Measure your people's happiness as a performance indicator.

Job satisfaction is an important and useful leading indicator of productivity. A lot more firms are starting to proactively keep tabs on how their people, both professionals and staff, are feeling about their work.

One tactic is to run an anonymous survey (using a tool like [Glint](#)) that asks people how willing they are to go above and beyond, whether they see themselves staying at the firm for more than a couple of years, and whether they'd recommend working at the firm to friends. Benchmark the results you get every six months to make sure you're maintaining or getting better.

Inquiring Leaders Want To Know

As the story goes, it was a warm spring day in Princeton, New Jersey. One Albert Einstein, who was then working at the Center For Advanced Studies, was found hands clasped behind his back, pacing back and forth, mumbling to himself incoherently. A bystander, curious to discover what it was that Dr. Einstein was so obsessed with, moved discreetly to within hearing range.

 Lost in thought, Einstein continued to repeat, *"If I only had the right question . . . If I only had the right question . . . "* To this great thinker, the journey to understanding began not with solutions, but with questions.

Today, our preoccupation with finding answers must not obscure the importance of asking the right questions. In fact, average answers to good questions, more often than not, yield better insights than astounding answers to lousy questions.

Here are ten questions to clear out the cobwebs, jump-start your creative thinking, tickle the brain, and hopefully, get you energized to take action.

1. What would my leadership epitaph be if I was not around tomorrow?

Epitaphs are serious business so you might want to contemplate this one seriously. The essence of this question is to take a good hard look at what your colleagues are likely to say about you

when you are no longer in your position of leadership. What do you want to have remain as your signature, your mark, your memorable contribution?

2. What are the THREE most important priorities that I am trying to communicate to my colleagues?

Okay, you may possess an encyclopedic list of things that need your attention, but you had better have only three that have your unwavering commitment. It is only when you are communicating many times more than you think is necessary that your people are getting the message. When you think you've said the same thing for the 20th time, many are only hearing it for the first time.

Phrase your messages in vivid, memorable words. Examples, stories, and anecdotes make the point better than abstract talk.

Keep it simple. You have got to connect to hearts and heads at the same time. Keep repeating it over and over. Find different mediums (breakfast meetings, e-mail, video briefings) to get your message out. "*Here we go again . . .*" You will get sick of saying it long before your colleagues get sick of hearing it.

3. Did I observe anything worthy of recognition this past week?

We are either net takers (energy vampires) or net contributors (spark plugs) to the energy of others. We need to ask those we are trying to lead or influence about our energy leadership. All too often the way many leaders energize others is by leaving the room.

There are many factors that mobilize and energize. Some of the most important include appreciation, recognition, thanks, and celebration. We all need to feel like winners. The validity of

providing recognition is accepted and chanted about in internal memos, e-mails and on secret decoder rings. The problem is that nobody really provides any. A key aspect of rewarding the pursuit of excellence is in acknowledging behavior. But if we only recognize the victorious (that new client brought in) our professionals will tend to be quite conservative in their actions.

After all, if only a "win" gains recognition, then people will wait until conditions are most assured for victory. But if you recognize the behavior or the achievement of the first step, even if the victory is not imminent, you demonstrate that efforts are worthy.

4. What things that made us successful in the past do we need to forget, unlearn, or discard to be successful now and into the future?

Many of the things that made us successful in the past may now prove to be nothing more than time-worn assumptions about what clients really value, or what services remain worthwhile offering, or what constitutes profitability, or what ensures quality performance. This question should encourage us to examine our various personal assumptions to see if they are still viable and addresses one of the most important, yet overlooked, elements of organizational learning - - "unlearning." One of the keys to learning is to know when to erase old tapes. Children are fast learners largely because they do not have to unlearn all of the rubbish that has accumulated in the average adult's brain.

5. If our most demanding client ran this firm, what experiments or pilot projects concerned with doing something totally new would they have underway?

Do interesting, seriously "cool" ideas - about new services, new approaches, new methods, new niches, new ways to collaborate bubble up with great regularity from every nook and cranny of your firm? Good enough is never good enough these days, it is

only a sure-fire recipe for becoming yesterday's news. And, what new innovation have you failed with over the last six months and what has it taught you? (And if you can't think of anything that you have failed at, what does that tell you?)

Many firms assume that doing "more of the same" is innovating. It is NOT. It's simply doing more of the same. Turn your firm into a churning cauldron of interesting, limited-risk, small projects.

Up the ante: Set aside a modest, special budget to fund new experiments, assign one partner to oversee submissions, and get the word out now, that the firm welcomes new project ideas.

6. What portion of our business are we abandoning on a regular basis?

All business is not good business. Make hard decisions about those clients who are beneath your growing fee structure and no longer profitable; no longer provide a professional challenge or are too difficult to satisfy; are unable to provide the kind of references you want; or have become a problem by virtue of their payment habits or continual demands for discounts. Concentrating upon providing outstanding service to clients who are inferior, difficult, and unprofitable is not exactly the recipe for generating excitement or loyalty among your existing professionals or the way to attract new talent to your firm.

Fire your worst clients . . . or your best talent may eventually fire you**!**

7. What top three business issues are consuming the attention of our best clients?

It sounds so painfully trite but this question can go along way to help your colleagues understand how incongruous they might be with the concerns of their clients and what they might need to do to become more relevant and more valuable to clients.

Have each partner take a blank sheet of paper and list their largest and most important clients. Include as well: those (smaller) clients who represent fast-growing companies, or companies in emerging industries, that currently have or might soon present some form of significant business transactions. Let's have each partner note next to each company on their lists, *"the top three issues that are preoccupying the attention of the executives in that company"* as best they can identify and articulate them. If your partners have trouble with this . . . and far too many will . . . is it any wonder that we hear clients say (real world comment): *"I don't think they realize how their advice is disconnected from our business."*

Now have each partner identify the various available sources of information that can be accessed to either obtain the required information or verify their identified assumptions.

• Read the client's annual reports and publications

• Peruse industry magazines and literature

• Review conference or trade meeting agendas

• Meet with and ask the client directly

8.   What ideas might partners offer for how we could improve our efficiency in handling client transactions and get client matters accomplished at a lower cost?

Encourage everyone to ask "why" questions. Why are we doing things this way on a client's transaction? Why are we doing this at all? Would the client gladly pay us to be doing what we are doing? Would our clients prefer that we automate it, delegate it, outsource it, or eliminate it entirely?

Set an extraordinary goal to find the means to reduce your costs of conducting a specific project by 20 percent. See what your colleagues can deliver. What we deliver today will not be enough

for clients tomorrow, and what we charge today will be too much tomorrow. Guaranteed!

9. How loyal are our existing clients?

Find out what it would take - what a competitor would have to do - to have your important client lured away from you.

Most clients are brutally honest about telling you what it is that would pull them away. Ask of them the really tough questions. Not tough for them to answer, but the tough questions for you to hear their responses to.

Questions like:

"Tell us how our work and our relationship could be structured in the future so that we might be of the greatest value and help to your company?"

Being satisfied is important, but what follows from that is the extent to which your existing client is planning to use your services over the coming year.

Ask:

"What would we have to do to be your preferred provider for all of your transactions?"

Do what they say. Don't accept *"You're O.K."* as an answer. Keep asking.

Now get slightly devious. Get someone to pose as a potential client; as someone who is considering using your firm's services, and call a client that has just had some important matter completed by your professionals to get their candid reaction as to

whether they would "enthusiastically" recommend your firm's services.

SCARRY???

10.   How do we develop the kinds of skills that will make us indispensable to clients?

What you now know and are able to now do, what your current practice's success is built upon, will unavoidably depreciate in value unless you actively work on learning new things and building new skills. Continual "know-how" development is a lifelong requirement, not an option. Unfortunately, the systematic development of skills, if left unattended will not happen by itself. Thus, this question is intended to provoke how we might best make ourselves "indispensable."

Some professionals behave as though they believed that the true purpose of every meeting is to provide a forum for their long-winded presentation on what they have been up to lately. The very best use of the team's time is to review specific learnings and new developments acquired while serving clients, dealing with client problems, or gleaned by researching new and emerging issues that may impact the group's practice.

There is a vast difference in the value of hearing some colleague talk (in general terms) about a matter that they have been working on, versus hearing about what that professional specifically learned, that might be of use to others in the team, from the way in which a particular situation or transaction was handled.

Therefore, rather than: "*tell us what you are working on*?" the

question should be phrased: "*tell us please, what have you learned during these past few month that may be of value to the other members of our group*?"

Finally . . .

Always resolve to lead with questions. There are a few additional and critical questions that successful leaders need ask of themselves, and ask of all of their partners:

• What are we best at?

• What are we world-class great at?

• What makes us unique?

• How are we going to serve our clients in a way that nobody else can?

• What "wow" new services can we offer?

• What are we going to do that will truly lead the market?

And . . . successful leaders don't stop asking these questions and they certainly don't stop even after getting a dignified answer.

The effective leader's motto (repeat after me):
"We can always do better."

Amen.

Be An Enthusiastic Change Agent

It is gross understatement to acknowledge that we are living in a world of accelerating change. That said, ironically this is likely to be the past that somebody in the future will be longing to return to.

Your job as the leader isn't to adapt to change, but to create change. So why not enter the fray with all guns firing, all hands on deck, and everyone focused on the targets you have chosen.

No one enters the Olympics shouting "*Go for the bronze!*" Pursuing the gold and ending up with the bronze may be a noble effort, but pursuing the bronze and ending up in 13th place makes little sense.

If your firm's culture doesn't adjust - rapidly - everybody loses. It's trite to say, but what was unthinkable yesterday, becomes routine today. Trying not to disturb people, seeking to appease everybody by taking it slow and easy, can be your least effective move.

People are not naturally resistant to change. It is not a function of DNA, heredity, or their post-secondary education. It is however, a function of your team's culture and internal systems. You can't please every one of your colleagues, even under the most routine of circumstances.

Attempts at incremental change - "*tweaking*" the firm - ordinarily die for lack of energy.   If you try to go slowly, bureaucracy and resistance to change will cancel out your efforts. So get radical.

TAKE ACTION THAT TURNS HEADS. Let your opening moves leave no doubt that the old ways of doing things is incompatible with what is to come. As a Leader, you cannot ignite the flame of passion in others if you yourself, do not express inspirational enthusiasm.

In fact we expect our leaders to be enthusiastic, energetic, and positive about the future. Ever notice that while church dogma is more or less a given for any sect, the energy and enthusiasm of the parish priest, rabbi or imam can make an enormous difference to religious attendance.

Take your instructions from tomorrow; that is where you will find the answers you need. The window to the future gives better guidance than the mirror of the past. A quick scan of the future will tell us that our firm's very survival depends upon speed. Competitive advantage will come from being faster than the next guy. The race is to the swiftest. Don't burn up precious time and waste resources looking backward. This is a time for action, not introspection.

In fact Leadership is action, not a position. Proactive leaders will often pull the fire alarm when they spot critical changing conditions and fan trends into a looming crisis. Everyone is urged into immediate action.

What external trends are you observing that should be causing you to pull the fire alarm and issue a call for action within your firm?

Even if you have served as a firm leader for years, treat today as if it were your first day. Ask yourself, "*If I were just starting in this position, what would I do*?" Chances are you would do some things that you have just not gotten around to. Begin doing those things now.

Pick one major project per quarter; implement one smaller improvement every two weeks. **Focus on the doable.** Keep the urgency and enthusiasm for constructive change and improvement high.

_____

Postscript:
15 Leadership Reflections
From The Trenches

1. Culture change experts take heed: If you can infuse these practices into every leader's drinking water, you'll be more than halfway there.

2. Create goals that are both realistic and UNREALISTIC; commit your goals to writing and ensure that they are measurable, and then celebrate the achievement of each goal.

3. Repetition is paramount. Remember parenting? How many times did you have to remind your kid to shut the door, wipe their feet, take off their shoes or wash their hands before they did it on their own? Nobody remembers to do something after hearing it once. In this respect, adults are just overgrown kids -- make it clear and say it often. The bigger the change, the more this applies.

4. Be genuinely interested in the needs of others and be interested in the growth of others even more so than the others are at times.

5. Know that all endeavors will not be easy and will not happen the way you would have planned or wished. Inspire persistence even after the first, second, and third rejection of an attempt.

6. Infuse a need to grow by teaching . . . rather than simply giving the answers.

7. Fuss over others' events, achievements, families, and friends.

8. Avoid assuming that your communication or personality style is the one everyone else has and learn to modify your communication style to the style of others. Adhere to the principle that "communication is not what was said, but what is received."

9. Show up and play to the heart. Communication that is high-touch, low-tech inspires people to action faster than the one-way speech, the blog, the dry facts. If you want buy-in, find the passionate story, do the road show, and make it interactive.
10. Find the real meaning, stop hiding in your office, and get with the *people*.

11. Become clear and comfortable with the fact that leadership does not mean "being the most popular one on the playground."

12. Believe that people do what they get paid attention for, and be spontaneous, as well as scheduled in your recognition efforts; but avoid giving a public person, private recognition as they will see little or no value in it.

13. Maintain an awareness of just how much your body communicates and remember that your body continues talking long after your lips stop moving!!!

14. Remember that money does NOT motivate for the long term and becomes expected.

15. Do before talk, ask before tell. Almost all leaders over-talk and under-do. If you want people to make a change, DEMONSTRATE the change yourself first. Ask a lot of questions and listen well (it's why you have two ears and one mouth, right?). Fix something that is driving your colleagues crazy. You want more innovation? Show them an innovative idea you carried out. Want to cut costs? Cut one of your entitlements first. Anything less will be viewed as insincere and arrogant -- even though you are infinitely well-intended.
Exhibit leadership as part of who you are not what your particular title is.

*   *   *   *   *

About The Author

Patrick J. McKenna

an internationally recognized author, lecturer, strategist andseasoned advisor to the leaders of premier law firms, Patrick has had the honor of working with at least one of the largest firms in over a dozen different countries.

The *Financial Post* labeled McKenna *"a professional firm management and marketing guru, with a client base stretching from Britain to the United States."* Jim Kouzes, Chairman Emeritus, tompeters! company described him as *"a highly seasoned and extraordinarily credible professional."* And his consulting expertise was acknowledged when he was identified through independent research compiled and published by Lawdragon as *"one of the most trusted names in legal consulting."*

Patrick authored a pioneering text on law firm marketing, *Practice Development: Creating a Marketing Mindset* (Butterworths, 1989) recognized by an international journal as being *"among the top ten books that any professional services marketer should have."* His subsequent works include *Herding Cats: A Handbook for Managing Partners and Practice Leaders* (IBMP, 1995); and *Beyond Knowing: 16 Cage-Rattling Questions To Jump-Start Your Practice Team (IBMP,* 2000).

A prolific writer on the challenges of firm leadership, his book (co-authored with David Maister), *First Among Equals: How to Manage a Group of Professionals*, (The Free Press, 2002) topped business bestseller lists in the United States, Canada and Australia; was translated into nine languages; is currently in its seventh printing; and received a best business books of 2002 award. Leaders across various professions like Kenneth LeStrange, Chairman of Aon Risk Services; Douglas McCracken, CEO of Deloitte Consulting; Claudio Fernandez Araoz, Executive

with Egon Zehnder Partners; and Allan Koltin, President of the Practice Development Institute described the book as '*the essential guide to practice leadership*.'

Obsessed with innovation, Patrick was instrumental in introducing the first global (**InnovAction**) awards initiative in 2003, in conjunction with the College of Law Practice Management, to identify and celebrate global law firm innovation.

In 2006, McKenna's e-book *First 100 Days: Transitioning A New Managing Partner* (NXTBook) earned glowing reviews being read by leaders in 63 countries. This publication culminated in Patrick being asked to conduct a one- day masterclass for new firm leaders, usually held at the University of Chicago. Thus far over 80 leaders from AmLaw 100, AmLaw 200, accounting and consulting firms, hailing from four countries have graduated from the program. According to Hugh Verrier, Chairman of White & Case,
"*I was struck by the synthesis of the issues you presented. It was amazingly clear and comprehensive, given the breadth of the topic and the short time available. I was delighted to attend the event and I learned a lot from it.*"

The book *Management Skills* (John Wiley) named Patrick among the "*leading thinkers in the field*" together with Warren Bennis; and in 2008, *In The Company of Leaders* included his work amongst other notable luminaries like Dr. Marshall Goldsmith. His book, *Serving At The Pleasure of My Partners* (Thomson Reuters) was released in 2011; while his most recent work, *The Changing of the Guard, Second Revised Edition* (Ark Group, 2017), provides in-depth guidance on the leadership selection process in professional firms and resulted in his being acknowledged in *American Lawyer* magazine as "*a long time succession consultant and coach to new firm leaders*."

McKenna's published articles have appeared in over 50 leading professional journals, newsletters, and online sources; and his work has been featured in *Fast Company, Harvard Business*

Review, Forbes, Business Week, The Globe and Mail, The Economist, Investor's Business Daily and *The Financial Times*. He currently serves as Contibuting Editor to *Of Counsel: The Legal Practice and Management Report* (New York) and writes a periodic column for the Legal Executive Institute.

Patrick has lectured on professional service management and strategy for the Canadian, American and International Bar Associations; the Canadian Tax Foundation, the International Union of Lawyers, the Institute For Law Firm Management, The Institute For International Research, the Society for Marketing Professional Services, Centaur Conferences Europe and the Financial Times Of London. He is a frequently requested speaker, having appeared in London, Geneva, Vienna, Munich, Marrakech, Istanbul, Singapore, Hong Kong, New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and Toronto for professional conferences and seminars.

Patrick did his MBA graduate work at the Canadian School of Management and is among the first alumni from Harvard's Leadership in Professional Service Firms programe.

McKenna's decades of experience led to his being the subject of a Harvard Law School Case Study entitled: *Innovations In Legal Consulting* (2011). He was the first "expert" in professional service firms admitted to the Association of Corporate Executive Coaches, the #1 US group for senior-level CEO coaches; was the recipient of an Honorary Fellowship from Leaders Excellence of Harvard Square (2015); and voted by the readers of *Legal Business World* as one of seven international Thought Leaders (2017).

Most recently McKenna helped launch the first International Legal Think-Tank (LIFT: Legal Institute For Forward Thinking) comprised of thought leaders from three countries.

www.patrickmckenna.com | patrick@patrickmckenna.com
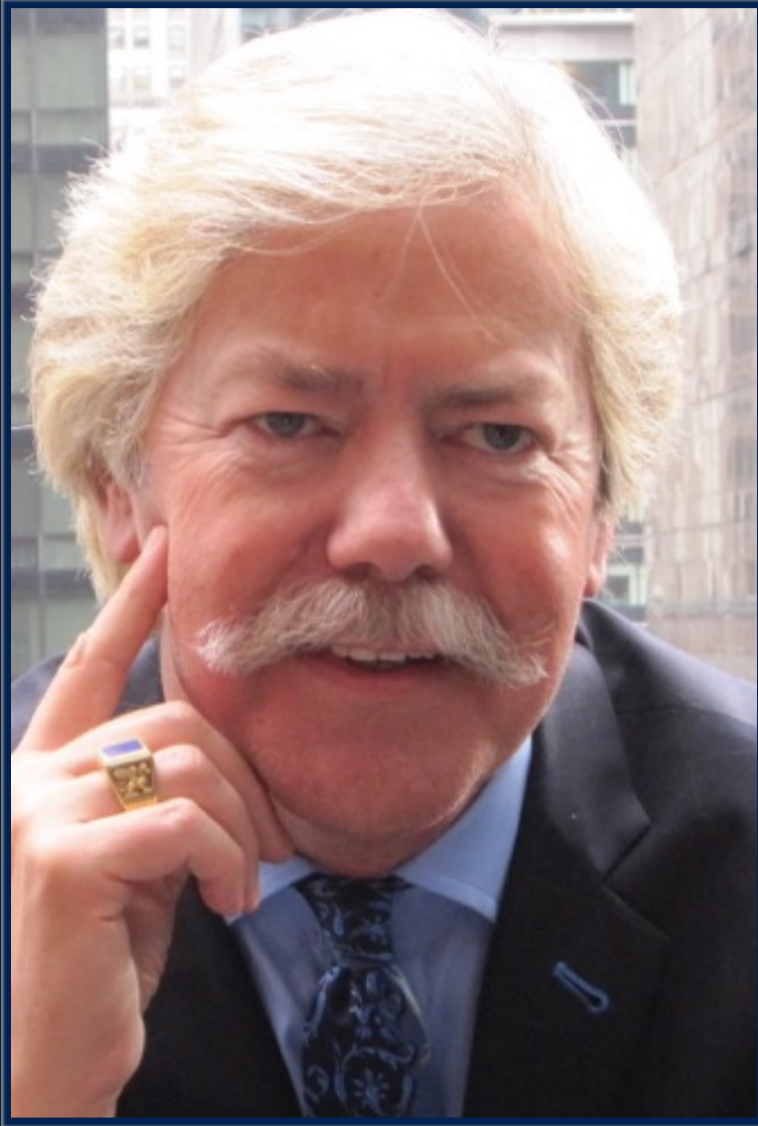
Also by McKenna

The Fearless Leader's Advisory Board, Thomson Reuters 2018 (Special White Paper)

The Changing Of The Guard: Selecting Your Next Firm Leader, Ark Publishing 2017 (Second Expanded and Revised Edition)

Serving At The Pleasure Of My Partners: Advice To The NEW Firm Leader, West/Thomson Reuters, 2011 (co-author)

Passing The Baton: The Last 100 Days, Ark Publishing, 2008

First 100 Days: Transitioning A New Managing Partner, NxtBooks (e-book), 2006

First Among Equals: How to Manage a Group of Professionals, Free Press / Simon & Schuster, 2002 (co-author)

Beyond Knowing: 16 Cage-Rattling Questions To Jump-Start Your Practice Team, Institute for Best Management Practices, 2000 (co-author)

Herding Cats: A Handbook for Managing Partners and Practice Leaders, Institute for Best Management Practices, 1995 (co-author)

Practice Development: Creating A Marketing MindSet, Butterworths, 1989 (co-author)