

Find Your Leadership Voice



by Robert Fortunato

We all know “that” look. The “what-do-you-know-you’re-not-a-lawyer” look. It’s that uncomfortable moment where our ideas are either adopted or we suffer the fate of being ignored as just another “nonprofessional.”

At that moment, two competing voices reside inside all of us. One speaks to the need to lead. That voice is urgent and compelling. You know what needs to be done and you’re the only one who can do it.

Competing with the leadership voice is the inclination to withdraw and settle back into the frustration of “knowing your place” in the firm. It’s the safe option for the short term but fatal in the long run. Knowing how and when to demonstrate leadership is often the key determinant in whether your large-scale marketing and technology projects will succeed or fail.

Exercising leadership is as much art as science. It’s as much about who you are as what you do.

Find Your Voice by Leveraging Success

Often there’s no reason to reinvent the path to success. Every firm has a culture, and you must understand what has worked or failed in the past. By discovering the firm’s genius and capabilities and avoiding its known weaknesses, you can more readily establish a platform to exercise your vision and leadership.

In working to have your voice heard, you must understand the firm’s top-line strategy and positioning, including its points of vulnerability with clients and competitors. When articulating your ideas and leadership plan, always relate them to the firm’s successes. Address how your solution helps the firm overtake competitors and better serve clients. It isn’t about you or what you want to do; it’s about how your vision furthers the firm’s strategic development.

Find Your Voice by Being Patient

Leadership is a journey that requires time, patience and persistence. Just because you have the solution and are ready to move forward doesn’t mean others are. Great leaders manage both in the short term and for the long haul. When lawyers in your firm initially reject your ideas, don’t take it as “no” but just one step in the process of getting to yes.

Find inspiration from leaders in all areas who have broken new ground. In the era of “Dick and Jane,” Theodore Geisel couldn’t get a publisher interested in his alternative-format children’s books. He was rejected at least 200 times. Dr. Seuss, my three-year-old son thanks you for your perseverance.

Find Your Voice by Listening

Leadership is about listening. You must really understand the organization’s needs and connect your initiatives to those needs. That is especially challenging because once you step into the leadership role, one-third of your information flow stops and a bull’s-eye appears on your back. Resist the temptation to become defensive. Redouble your efforts to get useful feedback and build coalitions.

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Periodically, remember to turn around and determine who’s following you. A leader without followers is just someone out for a very lonely and difficult walk.

When you turn around, some of the people you see may be dissenters. Embrace them. It may be difficult, but they can be your greatest sources of information and inspiration. At one firm I was advising, I encountered a very difficult personality who was not at all happy with the direction of the firm. I worked past his angry rant, listened to his message and gained a key understanding of deeply rooted problems within the firm that otherwise went unspoken.

Find Your Voice by Knowing Your Audience

Know your environment and determine whether your voice has resonance at your firm. Understand what is changeable, what isn’t and how to tell the difference. Even if you believe your firm is the right place, it may be the wrong time in its evolution for the lawyers to hear you or your message. Great talent in the wrong environment is wasted talent.

Take the Opportunity to Lead

Ultimately, large-scale change initiatives don’t lead themselves. Given the natural forces of entropy within organizations, innovative ideas without leaders just die. Understand yourself, your environment and the others around you and take the opportunity to lead. Only when you use it is your leadership voice heard.

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