

True Leadership is a Skill That Can Be Cultivated: Four Ways to Lead in Your Law Firm

By Janet Ellen Raasch

True leadership is a skill that can be cultivated – at all levels of a law firm.

“Authority and leadership are different qualities,” said Robert Fortunato. “A marketing director or lawyer can have a position of authority within a law firm, but be an unskilled leader. Conversely, an individual with no formal management authority can be an outstanding leader. You can be more effective at any time by understanding a few basic tenets of the leadership dialogue.”

Fortunato spoke on this subject at the monthly program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association, held July 12 at the Denver Athletic Club. He also expanded on this topic in follow-up interviews with the author. Fortunato is a California-based consultant who works with professional services firms around the country – helping them increase revenues and profits through a systematic approach to leadership, strategy and client development (www.ForStrategy.com).



“Today’s knowledge-based economy makes it even more important that problem-solving groups talk and think together well,” said Fortunato. “Today’s leader is someone who can facilitate the kind of ‘conversations’ that lead to good decisions. In a well-led conversation, or ‘dialogue,’ members of a group are encouraged to move beyond traditional discussion in order to think together – creating, refining and sharing knowledge to a purposeful end.”

To be a leader within this mode, an individual must consciously develop certain qualities – speaking with a true voice, listening as a participant, respecting the coherence of other points of view and suspending what you “know” in order to be open to new ideas. In addition, a leader must be able to evoke these qualities in all members of a group.

These qualities are reflected in four distinct actions that a leader must take within the context of a problem-solving conversation. This four-player model, originally developed by David Kantor, has been refined for business leadership by William Isaacs, a lecturer at MIT’s Sloan School of Management. Fortunato completed a year-long course with Isaacs in 2004.

“The beauty of this model is its simplicity,” said Fortunato. “It doesn’t take ten years to learn and practice. Once you recognize the dynamics of a conversation, you can make a choice ‘in the moment’ to do something different that enhances your performance as a leader – as well as others’ perception of your leadership abilities.”

“A successful conversation involves players filling each of these roles – move, follow, oppose and bystand,” said Fortunato. “A skilled leader will make sure that all of the actions are taking place – either initiating them or encouraging others

to provide them. In addition, the leader will make sure that no one role dominates – that all are balanced.”

In any conversation, some players are movers – they initiate ideas and offer direction. “Without a mover, a conversation will go nowhere,” said Fortunato. “When a mover is enabled with the qualities of a good leader, he or she will speak with an authentic voice and encourage others to do the same. A disabled mover, on the other hand, simply imposes his or her own views on others.”

Let us use the example of a law firm with too many practice groups. “Very few law firms can provide a full range of high-quality services to clients of all sizes in all industries in all parts of the world – although all-too-many of them make that claim,” said Fortunato. “No firm can differentiate itself from the competition by claiming to be all things to all people.”

An enabled mover might call a meeting to discuss this situation, and open the dialogue by saying that the firm should consider limiting the number of its practice groups – so that it can focus its resources on developing and promoting deep coverage of select areas rather than shallow coverage of many.

Also essential to any successful conversation are followers – participants who complete what the mover has said, help others clarify their thoughts and support what is happening. Without followers, there is no completion. “An enabled follower listens with an open mind, and supports what is said with observable experience,” said Fortunato. “A disabled follower listens selectively, or does not really intend to provide full support.”

For example, an enabled follower in the above scenario might say, “That’s a good idea. There is obviously a lot of overlap among our practice groups that could be consolidated under a larger umbrella. Let me take a first swipe at developing a structure.”

Still other players in this model must oppose, challenging what is being said. “Without opposers, there is no correction for bad ideas,” said Fortunato. “Do not brand opposers as troublemakers and castigate them. In hindsight, many a disaster could have been avoided if only the team leaders had created an environment that allowed for opposition.”

An enabled opposer is respectful of other people’s views, but wants to clarify, correct or bring balance and integrity to the conversation. A disabled opposer does not respect the views of others and simply wants to block the idea of the mover. “Many a meeting ends up in a mover/opposer deadlock,” said Fortunato.

An enabled opposer might contribute to the dialogue by adding, “We’ve spent a lot of time over the years developing expertise in all of our practice areas; a lot of our attorneys might feel disenfranchised by this action. How can we involve these individuals in the process and help them make any necessary transition?”

Finally, there is an essential role in any conversation for the bystander – who actively follows what is going on and provides perspective. “A good leader can also be a bystander when he or she suspends personal ideas and opinions in the interest of objectivity,” said Fortunato. “The bystander calls attention to the process. A disabled bystander, on the other hand, claims to be the only one to understand the process.”

As the conversation around our example continues, the enabled bystander might say, “The firm has attempted to limit the number of practice groups a number of times in the past, but we’ve never managed to get out of the starting gate. What can we do differently – this time – that will have better results?”

“Each of the roles in the four-player model is equally valuable to the conversation,” said Fortunato. “A good leader is not ‘stuck’ in any one of these roles, but moves smoothly among them as necessary. If a mover proposes an idea, for example, and everyone just nods their heads, the mover may exhibit a different kind of leadership by switching to another role, perhaps bringing up possible objections to his or her own idea.

“The goal is that there is a balanced system of conversation at play. As a result, all alternatives are brought out into the open and carefully and respectfully considered before any decision is made,” said Fortunato. “This process works just as well for small ‘day-to-day’ decisions as it does for large ‘bet-the-firm’ ones – so it can be adopted within any context where better decision-making is the goal.”

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