

## **Don't Accept Weak Leadership!**

*by August J. Aquila*

This is not another article about great leadership characteristics. It's about the weak and inept leaders and what partners need to do to change the current situations.

Partners need to stop kidding themselves regarding the effect of weak leadership on their firms. Ineffective leaders do more harm than good. Now is the time to rise in arms and perhaps show weak and ineffective leaders the door. So much has been written about good leadership. But what do firms do when their leader is not good?

We know that a successful leader needs energy, passion and vision to tackle the challenges facing firms today. But there are degrees of successful leaders. Leadership is not just black or white. It falls on continuum from inept to extremely competent. It's not an easy task leading a law firm today. There will always be Monday morning quarterbacks (your other partners) to tell you what you should have done.

### **Tale Tail Signs of Poor Leadership**

I'm sure that many of you could add to this list, but here are some of the sure-fired signs that a firm has weak leadership.

- Firm is heading for an implosion
- The way partners resolve issues is by finger pointing
- The firm is in a spiral downward trend
- The best producers often decide to leave the firm or just look out for themselves
- The partners with the most self-confidence leave
- Partners cannot resolve issues and are at a bitter stand off
- Firm profitability suffers or remains flat
- Firm experiences a higher level of staff turnover and dissatisfaction

### **How to Spot a Poor Leader?**

Poor leaders have several traits in common. They usually have a low level of self-esteem. And while they may appear to be confident, they lack faith in themselves. They are often bullies.

Here are some common traits that I have observed in these leaders:

- Exaggerates their achievements and talents
- Is preoccupied with power
- Believes he is special and unique, i.e., The other partners just don't measure up to him
- Has a sense of entitlement, i.e., I'm worth more than the rest of the partners
- Is arrogant
- Lacks trust in others
- Is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his goals
- Needs to control people and situations or avoids decision making and confrontation

### **How Did They Get There?**

In many small and mid-size firms, the ineffective leader is often the founding partner. Sometimes, the managing partner inherited the position because of tenure or book of business, not because of his or her management skills and talents. And other times the partners elect the person they think will best serve in that position without giving attention to the person's leadership temperament, style or skills.

### **Take the Bull by the Horns**

When partners find themselves with a weak and ineffective leader, they need to take ultimate responsibility and assume control of the firm. While this is not an easy task, it is one that is critically necessary for the future livelihood of the firm. It's important to put the issue out on the table without blaming anyone in the firm. The partners need to work together to develop a transition plan that saves the firm and also the face of the current managing partners.

This is probably one of the most emotional situations that will arise in the firm. And while the partners may feel their firm is unique, I can tell you from first-hand experience that more firms suffer from some sort of weak and ineffective leadership than strong and effective leadership.

Partner action can range from helping the managing partner to become more effective, actually asking the managing partner to step down to imploding the firm. With the help of a neutral third party, here is how you can take some action:

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- First, get the managing partner to acknowledge that his leadership skills are lacking. Have specific examples so that you can talk about actions and results (or lack of results), rather than the person.
- Second, inform the managing partner that the partners are undertaking this initiative for the betterment of the firm. Their goal is not necessarily to force the individual out, but to make sure the firm achieves key milestones.
- Third, decide what help the current managing partner needs. Outline his/her strengths and weaknesses. Then determine if someone from within the firm can help the managing partner to become more effective or whether an outside coach is needed. You should also consider one of the many leadership programs available in the market.

### Do It with Class

Ideally, you want to make sure that the process is done fairly and the individual is treated with respect. Your staff will judge you on your actions. It's better for everyone if the current managing partner can save face and retire or step down with grace, rather than to retire with a burning ship behind.

Remember, an ineffective leader can be more than just *ineffective*. The individual can be the death of the firm. The primary activities of an effective leader are to drive the firm's strategic agenda, to set goals, assign responsibilities and help the partners grow professionally and personally. If a leader does not do these things, nothing else may matter.

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### About the Author



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