



THE TENSIONS OF LEADERSHIP

LEARNING TO BALANCE THE ENDS

BY PATRICK J. MCKENNA

During the past couple of years I have had the privilege to peek behind the veil of law firm leadership and hear candid discussions about the challenges lawyers face when transitioning to a leader's role. From the stress involved in looking like you know what you're doing and the huge time demands imposed by your partners' requests, to feeling disoriented by the scale and scope of the mandate, many quietly struggle with the pressures that accompany their leadership roles. And the great majority of leaders—in any position of responsibility—are at their most vulnerable early in their tenure. As a new leader, you may feel confused and indecisive just at the time you want to appear clear-sighted and strong-minded. You may feel overwhelmed and anxious just when you want to be seen as composed and dynamic. In fact, there are a number of what I'll call "leadership tensions"—meaning the more or less ongoing dynamics of the job that you must wrestle with to effectively handle the responsibilities of leadership.

Each of us, when serving as a leader, has a natural predilection to favor one approach or another. Or, put differently, we see a spectrum of ways to approach a situation and tend to gravitate to one end of the spectrum over the other. Our preference is often “hard-wired” into us, the result of past experience gained before entering into the current leadership position. What seasoned leaders come to learn is that the only way to navigate these tensions successfully is to manage both ends simultaneously.

Let’s take a look at the top five tensions of leadership—see “The Top Five” box on the right—with an eye toward what you, as a new leader, can do to navigate them. To give you a sense of what it truly feels like on the front lines, each of the following sections leads off with a quotation from a real-life law firm leader (kept anonymous for reasons that will be obvious).

THE TOP FIVE TENSIONS OF LEADERSHIP

1. Do I shake things up or do I preserve the status quo?
2. Do I strengthen my bonds with people or do I maintain a distance?
3. Do I demonstrate that I know what to do or do I ask for help?
4. Do I strongly influence the decision I want or do I facilitate a consensus?
5. Do I focus on achieving results or do I accept a degree of uncertainty?



Determining Appetite for Change Tension: Where do I shake things up and where do I preserve the status quo?

“Lawyers are creatures of habit and busy lawyers even more so. The time and effort to condition them to new modes of operating should not be underestimated. On a variety of change initiatives, my personal goal is to reduce the time from ‘That’s the dumbest idea I ever heard’ to ‘We always do it that way’ from five years to three years!”

As a leader, you have to find a way to obtain a sense of agreement from your partners on the direction the firm, practice group or other entity should pursue. That direction has a great deal to do with the performance that you as the leader are charged to deliver. But it also has a great deal to do with your partners’ collective appetite for change. “Our dilemma,” one managing partner explained to me, “is that we hate change *and* love it at the same time. What my partners want is for things to remain the same but get better.”

To manage the tension inherent in this love-hate attitude toward change, you have to get a grip on the direction your partners want to go, which requires gathering their

input and absorbing the information they provide to you. There are many questions that you will need to address with them, but two are pivotal:

- What are the critical things we need to change as a firm and why?
- What are the most important things about our firm that we should be sure to preserve and why?

Among your goals for this process will be defining the firm’s key challenges and gathering the input needed to develop your strategic agenda for going forward.

ADVICE TO KEEP IN MIND

- Timing is everything. Without quickly determining where both support and pitfalls lie, your leadership will stall. Which means you must

get your partners’ input into what they see as the group’s preferable direction as early as possible in your tenure. An excellent way to do this is to conduct one-on-one interview sessions, asking all partners the same questions to get their insights and solicit their advice. See what themes emerge. Clarify what they want to see you shake up and what they want to see you preserve. Strive to establish your credibility and win their trust as you do so. It is wise to have them see that you are genuinely engaged and willing to listen before you ever speak about where *you* think the firm needs to go. Doing nothing but listening, for as long as you can stand it, is the most important thing you can do.

- There are also some questions you need to ask yourself, including: How do I begin to make a difference? What do I want to make a difference about? Regrettably, some leaders accept unachievable missions and targets that are far too ambitious. Others become leaders and are told little about what is expected, other than that they should “continue to make improvements.” If you believe the direction you are being asked to pursue is not realistic, or too vague, or cannot be achieved within the expected time frame, make your feelings known as soon as possible.

Developing Working Relationships

Tension: Where do I need to strengthen bonds with people and where do I need to maintain a distance?

“I realized that fundamentally my relations with my partners would never be the same. Everyone has an agenda when they talk to you. As managing partner, you become more isolated and can never again just be one of the guys.”

Usually for people to follow you, they need to have a strong relationship with you. They need to feel that they know you as a human being, and they need to feel a connection and sense of empathy for your beliefs, values and stated priorities. Concurrently, they need to feel that you have invested the time to know and understand them—and that you have a solid grasp of what they hold important.

Without a strong sense of relationship existing between you and your colleagues, great goals are impossible to set, performance cannot be sustained, major difficulties cannot be overcome, and new opportunities rarely get created.

However, there is also the danger that if you fail to maintain some independence from colleagues, you may become identified with one clique or coalition in the firm. I recently overheard a partner at one firm commenting that a particular proposition, while rather absurd, would likely get positive attention because the originator was a “FOG.” When naively asked what a FOG was, the partner responded, “That is an acronym for Friend Of Greg”—the firm’s chair and managing partner.

The tension here results from questions about degrees of closeness and distance. Too close and you are seen as cliquish. Too distant and you risk creating a sense of aloofness, mistrust and resistance when you try to get things accomplished. Without developing strong relationships built on *mutual respect*, you may soon detect increased feelings of division within the firm.

ADVICE TO KEEP IN MIND

■ Building and maintaining relationships is a critical part of your role as a leader. Your partners want to know if you care about them as individuals, if you care about helping them solve their problems and enhancing their careers. Remember that leading is always done *with* others, not to them. Everyone wants a cheerleader, someone to believe in them, to help them have a can-do attitude. Think through what you can do to let all your partners know that you believe they can become even more of a success.

■ As a leader, you are under a microscope. The way you respond to questions and requests, your decisions, how you make them, and whom you consult will be observed very carefully (with others attempting to dissect what you say and the signals you send). To achieve balance between degrees of closeness and distance with your partners, you may need some time to transform some relationships. The key is to remember that good leaders customize their relationships to individuals.

Appearing Knowledgeable in Your Role

Tension: How do I show that I know what to do and how do I stop to ask for help?

“Notwithstanding all of the qualities I believe I have, I’m feeling like I’m a fish out of water. Yet how do I tell anyone what I’m going through? I need them to go on believing in me and trusting that I know what I’m doing.”

When you are new to the responsibilities of leading a group, you quickly find that the skills that made you a highly successful practitioner are not necessarily the skills that will transform you into a successful leader. You have an enormous amount to learn about your new function and its responsibilities. However, if you overdo it in seeking help from others, you risk being seen as unprepared, lightweight or insubstantial. Partners may soon wonder if you are ever going to get around to adding value.

Alternatively, if you come across as having all the answers and trying to show everyone how to succeed, you risk being seen as imposing your views, being uninterested in the partners’ opinions, and prone to antagonizing and irritating them.

So the tension arises as you realize that, at one end of the spectrum, it isn’t wise to come across as a know-it-all; but, at the other end, your people will not be confident in the direction the firm is taking unless you act as though you know precisely where the firm should be going, what it will encounter along the way, and what the destination will look like once it has been reached.

ADVICE TO KEEP IN MIND

■ Most people want their leader to succeed and will be willing to help you learn so that you can add value. Heed the old adage: He who asks a question is a fool for five minutes, but he who doesn’t is a fool for the rest of his life.

- All learning challenges a person's self-image. As a leader, you need to recognize that learning means you will have to modify some of your viewpoints and certainties.
- You will function more effectively when you have a confidant—someone you can trust, who understands the joys and successes, the difficulties and frustrations of leadership.

Making Decisions

Tension: When do I strongly influence a decision and when do I step back and facilitate consensus?

"In some cases I've learned that I need to be more explicit ... 'here is where I believe we need to be going and this is what I think we need to do to get there, based on the discussions that I've had.'"

Deciding who will make what decisions and how decisions will be reached are fundamental acts of leadership. That said, effectively handling these fundamentals presents yet another area of tension.

On the one hand, you know that your partners will likely take more responsibility for implementing decisions when they have a part in actually making the decisions. This argues for wider distribution of decision-making authority and a consensus style from you as the leader.

On the other hand, you must often reconcile the need to appeal to partners who don't want to move too quickly with the market reality that opportunity windows don't stay open forever. This argues for a quicker decision-making process than obtaining full consensus might allow. Whether to influence or facilitate can be a function of firm culture, situational dynamics and the leader's personality. In fact, of all the tensions noted, personality may play the largest part in how you resolve this one. You may identify more strongly with either influencing or facilitating—and either style will definitely shape how your firm operates.

ADVICE TO KEEP IN MIND

■ Things can get very stuck with this tension. As a leader, you will confront situations that are more complex than you may be used to and than your habits are suited for. If you stick rigidly to only one way of handling a situation—be it influencing or facilitating—you may become far less effective as a leader than someone who works at developing skills in both decision-making formats. What you must do, as with the other tensions, is administer an appropriate dosage of both influencing and facilitating.

Setting Action Priorities

Tension: How do I maintain focus on achieving results and how do I remain accepting of uncertainty?

"You don't want to show any weakness, any self-doubt, any concern about making a difficult decision. Remember, you are the firm leader, which means nothing but confidence and high energy when you walk into a room."

You likely want to achieve some impressive results during your tenure as a leader. And you will probably go to considerable lengths to achieve them, since your sense of self-worth, personal reputation and ultimately your leadership legacy depend on producing measurable results.

The challenge is that you inhabit a world infused with uncertainty. So simply being methodical and persevering will not guarantee that you get the results you seek. You need to cultivate the ability to be comfortable with uncertainty and accept that it's a fact of a leader's life.

At the same, however, you need to be confident that you will be able to achieve the ends you are pursuing for the firm. Leadership is about credibility. Credibility requires confidence and certainty. Allowing others to see that you lack certainty can be dangerous in the real world. Once doubts about a leader's certainty begin to form, they can be very difficult to repair. Every leader knows this and every leader fears it.

The tension arises between maintaining a reasonable uncertainty side by side with a resolute focus. Your success in balancing both will depend on anticipating new developments and understanding coming changes. As a leader, you must stay on top of information about the trends affecting the profession and your various business opportunities. Your future is directly linked to your ability to respond quickly—but also with flexibility.

ADVICE TO KEEP IN MIND

■ Humans tend to keep doing what is comfortable. To counter that tendency, you need to make a conscious effort to turn off the old tapes that are playing in your mind and be willing to let go of the past. The most effective way to minimize the intimidating effect of uncertainty is through planning. The more understanding you have of a likely-to-happen change, the less debilitating the change will be.

■ Knowing when to unlock from a declared position and advocate a new one calls for courage. Accept that you will not be 100 percent right in all your judgment calls. And

Tensions Questionnaire for Law Firm Leaders

If you want to manage the tensions of leadership more effectively, you must first get a sense of how you currently operate with the different tensions. This questionnaire will help you determine your preferred style.

From among the following two sets of variables, choose one that represents the style with which you're most comfortable. There are no right or wrong answers. Your choice of A or B represents how naturally disposed you are to act in one way versus the other. Here is how you might want to think about the results: With all five of these tensions, you cannot decide to operate or behave in one manner or the other, gravitating to one approach over the other. To be effective, you must embrace the paradox of using both approaches at the same time and with varying emphasis, depending on the context.

— Patrick McKenna

DETERMINING APPETITE FOR CHANGE

A. Shaking Things Up:

- I feel a great need for our firm to get on with making things happen.
- Things stagnate if we don't constantly challenge the way we do things around this firm.

B. Preserving the Status Quo:

- The traditional tried-and-true approaches to solving problems are usually the best.
- I am often the one to suggest that we stand back and take time to think before we commit to action.

DEVELOPING WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

A. Strengthening Bonds:

- I get a great deal of satisfaction from helping each of my partners become even more successful than they were.
- Loyalty, respect and trust between and among partners is a central value of mine.

B. Maintaining Distance:

- It is important that I am valued on the basis of my overall contribution to the firm.
- I prefer to conduct my relationships with partners on a businesslike and formal basis.

APPEARING KNOWLEDGABLE

A. Knowing:

- I enjoy having the opportunity to teach others by coaching and contributing my knowledge and experience.
- I feel confident in what I am stating when contributing to discussions and decisions.

B. Seeking Help:

- I believe it is important to gather information and consult with partners before introducing new initiatives.
- I am comfortable with asking for feedback and advice so that I can improve whatever I am working on.

MAKING DECISIONS

A. Influencing:

- It is important to be, and be perceived to be, firm and decisive.
- I think clarity of direction is more important than consultation.

B. Facilitating:

- It is important to obtaining buy-in to be consultative before decisions are reached.
- If partners are involved in helping make the decision, they take more responsibility for the outcomes.

SETTING ACTION PRIORITIES

A. Focusing on Results:

- I drive very hard toward goals and am not easily distracted.
- I believe you create your own future by always having clear objectives to work toward.

B. Accepting Uncertainty:

- I think a clear direction emerges as a result of being attentive to your marketplace and becoming aware of what is needed.
- Going with the flow is often more effective than sticking to your guns.

beware of the mind-set imposed by your professional training and your ego's need to be correct. If any of your decisions turns out to be wrong—which is bound to happen—don't let the business need to change direction be superseded by fear that you will seem indecisive. When you expect success to follow a period of change, it will have a positive effect on your partners' attitudes.

Keep the Faith and Keep Learning as You Go

Transforming into a leader is no small challenge. It is very human to get discouraged at times. Sometimes others will criticize your objectives. Sometimes attaining your goals will seem harder than you thought. Just remember that there is always an element of personal sacrifice and a need to remain flexible when one undertakes a leadership role. When chal-

lenges arise or unexpected events occur, the value of a leader with a high-faith factor cannot be underestimated. It is a powerful motivator for every individual you lead.

All successful leaders work through the top tensions over some time during their incumbency. Thinking through these issues at the *start* of your tenure will give you a more informed basis for formulating your objectives and pursuing your goals. **LP**

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