

Where Leaders Stumble

by Patrick J. McKenna



I'm currently collaborating with a colleague who is doing a lengthy research project attempting to identify the characteristics, traits and behaviors of the most effective law firm managing partners. In our most recent discussions he posed this question: "*In firms you've observed where the managing partner isn't doing well or leadership is weak or dysfunctional, what one or two things do you find are the biggest or most common causes of failure?*"

To provide a meaningful response, I went back through a decade worth of notes from training practice group leaders, scrutinized the results from the psychometric data that I have had over 50 new managing partners complete as part of the First 100 Days Program, and reflected upon what I'd observed in working with hundreds of law firms over a couple of decades. Here are some of the more common warning signs that I've observed in working with leaders at all levels:

• **Displaying Arrogance.**

These are those leaders who just naturally expect to be admired, praised, indulged, and obeyed. They anticipate that they will be successful in everything they do, believe in their own legacy, and when their expectations are frustrated, they explode with "narcissistic rage." From my observer's perspective, what is most distinctive about these leaders is their self-assurance which often gives them a certain presence—they are the first to speak in a group, and they do so with great confidence . . . even when they are wrong.

If you think you have all the answers and that your role as leader is basically to direct your peers as to what each should be doing; to assign each a specific project and dictate who will work on which, you may just be in for some critical push back. This leader stumbles whenever they begin to think that their colleagues need to serve them, as apposed to the leader serving his/her people. You need always to be willing to work along-side your people to get the job done. In other words there should be nothing in your practice group or firm that anyone else does, that you would not be willing to do yourself.

The very best leaders recognize that their role is to help those in their groups/firm, become even more successful in their careers than they would have had that leader not been in the picture.

• **Suffering A Lack of Focus**

This lack of focus can occur in several ways. Oftentimes, the leader unconsciously allows the urgent to crowd out the important and then eventually loses sight of what they are trying to accomplish that will advance the firm. Even more debilitating, the leader ends up trying to do too much or too many things at the same time, appearing to start one project, quickly losing interest, and then gravitating to the next 'flavor-of-the-month.'

Suffering a lack of focus then disorients a leader and sets the stage for poor communication. These leaders delude themselves into believing that their colleagues can sense their goals and carry out their wishes without being told. When misunderstandings arise, they blame others for a lack of effort (or commitment) rather than recognizing their own negligence.

At the present moment, what is your primary focus? If you can't write it in a couple of short, pithy paragraphs, then your leadership suffers from a lack of clarity. Take the requisite time to center your focus on what's most important.

• **Putting Paper Before People.**

Often leaders become so task orientated, that they forget to be people orientated. As a leader you can quickly become so consumed by the day-to-day requirements that all too often you make the mistake of seeing your partners more as interruptions than opportunities. As a leader your colleagues will always be seeking your attention, and that's what you've got to give them.

Leadership is basically a people business. You can't let paperwork and deadlines create a barrier between you and the opportunity to touch your colleague's lives. So here's the key: Never see your people as interruptions, because those kind of interruptions is your work. If your partners conclude that your day-to-day tasks are more important, they come to the conclusion that you don't care about them. And there is a very old cliché that no leader should ever lose sight of . . . 'People will never care how much you know, until they know how much you care.'

• **Being Risk Adverse**

The overly cautious leader is careful, conservative, and worried about making mistakes. Even positive feedback can be distorted or discounted. These individuals cannot seem to tolerate the unpleasant feelings associated with making a mistake; and as a result, they seek to avoid the unpredictable events related to decision-making. At their best, they are prudent and careful about evaluating risk; they rarely make rash or ill-advised moves, and they provide sound advice about intended courses of action. At their worst, however, they avoid innovation, resist change, stall, and drag their feet, even when it is apparent that something needs to be done.

These kinds of leaders fear failure far more than they desire success. Past success creates pressure: "Will I be able to sustain my past practicing performance in this new role?" When driven by the fear of failure, these leaders are unable to take reasonable risks. They

limit themselves to tried and proven pathways. Any thoughts of trying to be innovative diminish and eventually disappear.

No progress has ever been made without new ideas being accepted and implemented. Leaders need to continually ask themselves: “Which is more important, the journey or the destination?” Are you still taking reasonable risks? Prudent leadership avoids reckless risk, but neither is it paralyzed by fear.

Poor leadership in good times can be hidden, but poor leadership in bad times is a recipe for disaster. The warning signs in life — from speed limits to prescription labels — are intended to protect us from disaster. As you consider these warnings of leadership failure, don't neglect taking an honest look at your situation.

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