

## The Art of Intentional Leadership: Everything Matters

Conventional wisdom for law firm leaders holds that the true essence of leadership requires setting a strategic vision coupled with a relentless focus on execution. Any energy devoted to activities not closely aligned with that core vision is wasted effort. According to this definition of leadership, a leader should never expend time on matters that are not core to the ultimate vision.

Based on my tenure leading McDermott Will & Emery, from the depths of the Great Recession through the recent boom years, I believe that this conventional wisdom is accurate but wildly incomplete. It is absolutely true that leadership requires carefully setting an ultimate vision, and then relentlessly focusing on executing that vision. Leadership without a clearly articulated vision is a fool's errand: if you do not know where you want to go, you have no chance of getting there.

But this strategy-execution definition of leadership is too monochromatic and fails to capture the true complexity of leadership. Indeed, it represents only a small portion of what great leaders actually do. In my opinion, real leadership is intentional and ever present, and is neatly captured in the axiom that “everything matters.”

So how can it be true that “everything matters” when at the same time the conventional definition of leadership exhorts leaders not to worry about everything but to focus only on that which is core? Isn't there an irreconcilable tension here between only focusing on core activities while also believing that everything matters?

In my opinion, there is no irreconcilable tension. Instead, great leaders must think deeply and broadly about all

of the various components of leadership, including strategy-execution, but must also have a cold-eyed recognition that everything that a leader does or says will have a consequence for the organization he or she leads. It is a daunting task.



Jeffrey E. Stone

What do I mean when I say “everything matters”? I first learned that everything matters not as a law firm leader but as a trial lawyer. Early in my career, I had the good fortune to appear before dozens of juries both as a prosecutor and as a defense lawyer. I learned through some wonderful (and some painful!) experiences that the

collective wisdom of a jury is immense—and stems from the fact that someone on the jury is watching and remembering everything that happens in the courtroom. Trial lawyers know and appreciate that someone on the jury will remember everything that the lawyer does—nothing goes unnoticed. What the trial lawyer says; whether their tone of voice inspires confidence; where they stand; what they wear; what their facial expressions reveal; whether they seem flustered—someone on that jury is always watching, noticing, and remembering.

This phenomenon is equally true for leaders in law firms. Someone is always watching and remembering everything that you say or do. And unlike jurors who are not supposed to talk to each other before the end of the case, we know that our colleagues, staff, and partners are talking to each other all the time, often in real time online.

Great leaders embrace this. They are intentional about everything they do or say. They hold themselves accountable for every action—whether it is what they say, what they write, how they interact with their colleagues, how they

dress, how they inspire, who they sit next to at meetings, and even the jokes they choose to tell. They use every opportunity to set a tone that is in sync with the ultimate vision and values of the firm. The smart leader never misses a chance to reinforce that message, using every tool at their disposal.

What does this mean—what must we be intentional about? Let me lay out five suggestions. First, leaders must lead with character and seek out every opportunity to imbue that sense of character in the firm. Great leaders are universally respected when they live and breathe the values of the firm, and are almost always marginalized when they speak or act in ways that deviate from those core values. If a core value of the firm is hard work, the leader must always be seen—in every action and interaction—as an incredibly hard worker. If a core value of the firm is responsiveness, the leader must model responsiveness, which means that messages are returned promptly, usually the same day, which can be a particularly daunting task for leaders who travel extensively to visit far-flung clients or offices.

Second, intentional leadership requires an incredible commitment to consistency and accountability. As leaders, we get relatively little credit for the times we act in accordance with our core values—but we will be remembered and pilloried for those occasions, even if infrequent, when our actions do not reflect the best of the firm’s core values. If the firm’s values place a premium on spending time visiting clients, a leader may get little credit for the 10 client visits that actually get made, but will certainly feel the fallout that occurs from the one client visit that the leader chooses not to make. If the core value of the firm is that everyone is expected to put the interests of the firm first, woe be it to the leader who puts his or her personal self-interest first—everyone will notice, and everyone will remember. And when it comes to suspicions of self-interest, there is no statute of limitations.

Great leaders hold themselves accountable and are the first ones to be self-critical when their words or actions fail to live up to the standards that they have set. Indeed, there is probably no faster way for a leader to lose the respect of those that they lead than to deny or cover up behaviors that

fall short of the mark. When a leader falls short of the standards that he or she sets for themselves, the only acceptable path for that leader is to own it—honestly and promptly. While this does not require an excessive or prolonged self-flagellation, it does mean honestly acknowledging mistakes when they are made.

Third, in addition to character, passion and inspiration matter. Great leaders always look for opportunities to inspire. And inspiration comes in many forms: it can be the small and individual exchange that is one-on-one, or it can be a grander statement that speaks to larger audiences. But the ability to inspire those whom we lead to achieve more than they ever believed possible is a core component of intentional leadership.

Indeed, true inspiration is not simply the motivational speech or the mass exhortation to do more or to work harder. Those kinds of communications, without more, are rarely persuasive and do little to change behavior. But when a leader can demonstrate sincerity, and use that sincerity to tap into the personal motivations of individuals, that can create wonderful opportunities for growth. Using personal motivations to inspire more successful behaviors is a hallmark of great leadership. To do this a leader must really know the people he or she leads, and this takes time and effort.

One way that great leaders achieve this level of personal motivation is to use their own personal charisma as a way of inspiring better behaviors. They extend—or withhold—their own approval or congratulations as needed, and use that as a device to encourage others to go beyond what they ever thought possible. When I was chair of McDermott, I used the power of the personal note, handwritten on my personal stationary, to inspire and reinforce those behaviors that I wanted to encourage. I was very intentional about it. I wanted people across our platform to know that I had noticed what they had done and had taken the time to write that personal note of congratulations or thanks. I would be very specific about what they had done, and why I thought it demonstrated something important.

Why a handwritten note? Because it demonstrated that, notwithstanding how busy I might have been, I still took

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the time to create that more personal connection. It showed that I noticed and cared. In our world of rote emails, a handwritten note on personal stationary stands out. I wrote hundreds of these notes over the years, to staff and attorneys alike, and it was not at all unusual for people to show me notes that I had written years before—and that they had saved. Sometimes they even told me that they had taken my note home to show their spouse or partner or children. That was real proof that the notes hit home and meant something important to the recipient.

Needless to say, everything matters in those notes—if you are trying to create a personal connection with the person to whom you are writing, get the little details right. If you reference someone's child or spouse in your note, make sure you spell the name correctly! Shawn might be Sean; Linda might be Lynda. Get the details right. You lose points for sloppiness, and you undermine the very message of sincere connection that you are trying to send.

A fourth component of the “everything matters” school of leadership is humility, and the need to resist taking credit for everything. Leading a law firm is a lonely job—when things go right, it is because lots of people rowed hard in the same direction, but when things go badly, seeking a scapegoat is natural. More often than not, the leader becomes that scapegoat, even when that is not entirely fair or factually justified. But our partners are always watching and listening to everything that we do and say, and when we claim credit we do not deserve, it undermines our credibility in a long-term way. Resist that temptation to claim credit—if you truly deserve it, others will know it without you having to point it out for them.

Finally, great leaders are great listeners. Every interaction with a colleague or staff member is an opportunity to demonstrate that the leader is really listening, and remembering what is said. Former President Bill Clinton was famous for his ability to make everyone he spoke to feel like they were the only person in the room when they were with him. He focused on them in a way that made them feel that he was really listening and really cared. He made eye contact and did not look over the person's shoulder as if looking for someone more important. He mastered the art of making people he encountered feel important.

As law firm leaders, we have that same opportunity—for many of our colleagues or staff members, they do not get frequent chances to speak one-on-one with the firm chair, particularly in larger firms. It is actually a special moment for them, even if to the leader it feels mundane. Great leaders never forget or minimize the power of that encounter, and they leverage that moment to achieve broader goals.

One tried and true technique for demonstrating that you are a great listener is through the leadership art of asking good questions. What is such a question? It is not “How are you doing?” or “What's new in your life?” Instead, it is a question that reflects that you know the person you are speaking with, and know something about what they are working on or worried about or particularly proud of. A good question is one specifically tailored for that individual at that time in her or his life. Ideally such a question will reference a previous encounter or conversation, demonstrating that you care enough to remember that previous interaction and that it actually meant something to you. A good question allows you simultaneously to learn something important while also demonstrating a sense of caring about that individual. And when that question comes from someone that is not only in a position of authority but is personally respected, it can create a lasting bond that inspires the individual and solidifies that person's connection to the firm.

Distilled to its essence, the “everything matters” school of leadership requires a leader to be intentional about every single interaction that she or he has and to recognize the potentially long-term consequences of each such opportunity. Walking past someone in a hallway without acknowledging them may feel to the leader like an inconsequential moment easily explained away because “my mind was elsewhere,” but to the person who felt unacknowledged, it is far more consequential—and perhaps demoralizing. Alternatively, the warm smile, the use of the person's name, and a quick comment about some relevant fact will demonstrate a level of connection and empathy that can motivate and inspire.

Being the leader of a law firm is hard work. It requires a multitude of talents and skills, and the list of things on the to-do list never seems to end. We have to wrestle with

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fundamental issues of diversity and inclusion in an increasingly global environment. Like every industry and profession, significant technological change is bending the way we do business—and the pace of that change is only accelerating. Partners seem more mobile than ever and younger attorneys are raising important questions about work-life balance. Being reminded that “everything matters” only contributes to a sense that the job is overwhelming in its demands, and perhaps unmanageable. But an honest assessment of the challenge of being a great leader requires honesty about the fact that we are measured across a multitude of metrics—and achieving greatness requires success across all of them.

The truly brilliant leader, whether in law or elsewhere, embraces the dynamic times in which we live and sets an appropriate strategy. The intentional leader will use every tool available to inspire his or her team to do more in executing on that strategy than they ever believed possible. Recognizing that “everything matters” may just help you be that brilliant leader who achieves that perfect blend of strategy, execution, and inspiration.

~**Jeffrey E. Stone**

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