



**ANDREW HEDLEY, DIRECTOR, HEDLEY CONSULTING**

## The challenges of leadership are different to the challenges of management

Law firm leaders face many challenges and carry huge responsibilities. Decision making that will define the future of their firms, for better or for worse, rests on their shoulders. They must develop, evaluate, shape, and articulate a vision and strategy in ways which engage and motivate others. They need the ability to build a broad and deep consensus so that the mandate they carry out is robust.

Most fundamentally, they are agents for change, prepared to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about their firm, and redefine expectations of behaviour and standards of performance. Simultaneously, they have to reconcile this need for change, some of which will be fundamental and unpopular, while maintaining the confidence of their electorate so that they are able to deliver on the vision and strategy that has been defined.

In such a dynamic and politically loaded environment, it is understandable that there is an inclination to keep a broad church happy (or at least not too unhappy!) Consequently, 'keeping your options open' is a philosophy to which many management teams subscribe, either overtly or by their actions. To be clear, this isn't to say that inflexibility and intransigence is a good thing, but rather that a clear sense of direction, being prepared to say 'no' to ideas that don't fit, and a commitment to achieving objectives, are crucial components of a successful firm.

These are issues of leadership, which is quite different to management in a number of elementary respects. An interesting delineation is suggested by John Kotter, the Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership at the Harvard Business School, in his seminal work *Leading Change*. Management, he contends, is fundamentally concerned with dealing with complexity: analysing situations, distilling them to their core, devising systems and controlling organisations. Leadership, on the other hand, is fundamentally about dealing with change: vision, engagement,

alignment of people and resources. It is about putting the business in a position where it is ready for what the future brings.

This future orientation means that great leaders must also have an eye to their legacy, preparing the next generation so that the future success of their firm is put on a sound footing. Ralph Nader, the US politician and activist, offers a powerful insight into the true nature of leadership, suggesting that one should start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers.

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Faced with succession challenges of significant magnitude, law firms are now alert to the need to prepare the next generation, but this has not always been the case. Historically, the idea of producing a 'leader factory' was seen as undesirable; a view often held most strongly by current incumbents! An environment in which those in leadership positions are plucked from the professional base (often on a fixed tenure) and return to 'real work' after their appointed term served only to reinforce this position. Add to this mix the highly consensual nature of the profession and it can be seen that the notion of leadership is challenging.

A better understanding of what makes a great leader is needed. In *Level 5 Leadership*, Jim Collins uses the sub-title 'The triumph of humility and fierce resolve' to summarise the qualities that define the

very best leaders. His research suggests that it is only the 'level 5 leader' with these qualities who is able to achieve sustainable competitive advantage, allowing their business to outperform its peer group in the longer term.

The humility factor is well encapsulated in his 'window and mirror' metaphor. Level 5 leaders look in the mirror to apportion blame and out of the window to give credit. Those less skilled have a tendency to look in the mirror for credit and out of the window for blame.

The second defining attribute is an unwavering will to succeed: they are resolute in the face of adversity, and through the force of their own determination and personality, enable their organisations to achieve that which was thought impossible.

A high level of self-awareness and the ability to motivate others are also key attributes. Great leaders develop a personal style that is appropriate to their firm and the environment it faces. This is illustrated by Daniel Goleman, who coined the term 'emotional intelligence', in his extensive research into leadership. His work shows that, while technical ability and IQ are important, high levels of emotional intelligence are twice as significant in delivering excellent leadership.

What does all this mean to a partner, newly appointed to a senior position, who is seeking an appropriate leadership style? They face many pressures, from keeping internal partner politics balanced to dealing with ever more demanding client and competitive pressures. They are also invariably fettered by a partnership agreement that has been written to make it impossible for the incumbent to govern by edict with 'contractual authority', even if they were so naïve as to try to do so.

Leading this sort of business requires an authority forged by personality, the communication of clear vision, demonstrable commitment to following this path and an unwavering determination to succeed.