Leading Up, Leading Down and Leading Sideways

By Renée F. Bergmann

A leadership role does not require an official title, although titles such as partner, practice group leader, general counsel or CEO certainly can make a leadership role easier for those in charge, and subordinates are more respectful and generally more deferential to those with official titles. But it is not a title that makes any person in a position of power a great leader. Leadership requires both a skill and a presence. It requires a positive attitude, along with an awareness of the needs of others and the willingness to engage those around you; those above you in the chain of command and those below you, as well as your peers.

If you take the opportunity to teach those above you to be better leaders by “leading up,” you may find that, in return, you reap the unexpected reward of mentorship from those individuals. Likewise, if you encourage your subordinates to be leaders, you are likely to improve your work environment and gain valuable allies in the process. If you “lead sideways,” by driving your peers toward good leadership decisions, you will similarly improve relationships and working conditions. When managing partners “lead up,” by making decisions to take their firms in new and innovative directions, the entire organization benefits. Indeed, some innovative decisions can lead an entire industry in a new direction.

Leaders Do Not Need Followers

Some say a basic concept of leadership is that you must have followers behind you before you can lead. I suggest that is not necessarily so, because leadership is not a horizontal concept. A leader need not only look “behind” them for followers. A leader should look up, down and sideways for leadership opportunities.

Leaders are people in constant training and do not just “happen” once they assume a position or post of authority. Many of the leaders you encounter are not managing partners of a firm, nor are they the CEOs of their companies; they are what I’ll call the “everyday leaders.” We would hope the managing partner of the firm and the CEO are already great leaders, but it may not always be the case. Perhaps the managing partner happens to have the largest book of business, or just rose through the ranks with no formal leadership training or aptitude for leadership. The everyday leader may not even be a partner or one of the key executives, but an everyday leader is a key member of any team.

Leading Up

No one can thrive in an environment without leadership. In fact, an environment without leadership will exist on autopilot only until a conflict arises. The environment will then demand some form of leadership to resolve the conflict. Progress is not made in an environment without leadership. Today’s work environment demands teamwork, which by definition is a form of constant conflict resolution. By working as a team and working through any conflicts, progress as a team is a natural byproduct of this environment. Every team, though, needs a leader at some point.

Not all managers are born leaders. Some managers have risen through the ranks of either their firm or business and then suddenly find themselves at the top as a result of a large book of business or some other measure of success at their company. Leadership training does not enter every manager’s path along the road to success. Others are managers as a result of pure seniority. This is not likely to be a good measure of a leadership in today’s work environment, either.

Be aware of the leaders above you, and identify those who may be leading by default. Perhaps they did not transcend to their present position by choice, and there are ways for you to make your relationship better and the team stronger. Many senior members of any firm may simply be so busy they do not see the effects of a lack of leadership on the overall office environment.

Taking the Lead

If your environment lacks the leadership necessary to allow you to thrive, take the lead yourself. “Leading up” is a concept where you can take control of not only your own destiny, but your environment; guide your staff, and over time, help the leaders above you. But this is a duty that must be undertaken gently and with finesse. Those taking initiative are viewed as “go-getters” within a firm or company, but those stepping out of line or overstepping authority may be viewed as troublemakers. It is a fine line.

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Lead those whom you can — those who want to be led — in a manner in which you would like to be led. Always work as a team member, rather than a dictator. Never be seen as a renegade. Remember, you do not have the ultimate authority — yet. Become a student of leadership training — it is a skill that is transferable, no matter what your level of seniority and no matter whether you stay with a firm, move to a government position, or go in-house. Leadership training is a skill that, as you rise through the ranks with any company, will make you the best manager you can be, wherever that may be.

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Be sensitive to the culture of your environment. Is it a team-like atmosphere, or is it one where hierarchy, rather than ability, defines your role? Leading up must be done as a team effort, or at least with a team spirit in mind, or the effort may not be successful — your efforts are likely to be viewed as those of a rebel. On the other hand, a team spirit can be contagious. Although not all managers are born leaders, once you have earned the trust and respect of those more senior to you, you will find those same leaders are likely to take the time to mentor you. If you are in an environment in need of leadership, then take the leadership initiative. Once you have gained the respect of those above you, the rewards you reap are those of developing a true mentor. Communication lines will also open between both those above you and those below you. Although not every manager is a great leader, the senior partner with a large book of business is likely to have some great mentoring tips to offer. Listen, and once they see your worth, you are in a position to build a better relationship.

Fill in the Leadership Gaps

Create an environment where leadership gaps can be filled from all levels — identify the gaps, and fill them in yourself wherever you see things are lacking. For instance, are communications gaps occurring between associates and partners, or associates and paralegals? Does the staff meet regularly with managers for updates on workloads and expectations? Are lines of communication clear within your firm? For instance, has a client demanded that you settle a case contrary to the way you have long-term consequences that have not been discussed? Who among the team members is expected to discuss and deliver that sort of news to a client? If the answers to these questions are unclear, then the communication lines are not open and there are some gaps to fill.

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Your Style or Mine?

A good leader must always be aware of the communication style of those around her. Your message will never be heard if you do not understand the communication style of those you are working with. One way to enhance your understanding is to learn how age or generations can affect work and communication styles. For instance, if your superior is considered a “Traditionalist” (born 1922-1943), you need to be aware that these individuals place a great significance on historical perspective. When you bring a problem to a traditionalist, offer a similar solution from the past. Analogize the present situation with a previous successful outcome, if not within your firm, then elsewhere. In the eyes of a traditionalist, you are an up-and-coming leader, with much potential.

Perhaps your superior is a Baby Boomer (someone born between 1943 and 1960; see Footnote 1). When “leading up” with a superior of this generation, you will need to be aware of their communication style as well. Of course, these are generalizations and you must adapt the way you communicate to the style of individual you are communicating with, or your message will simply never be heard. Or worse, your message will be mis-communicated, which is usually at the heart of all disputes or disagreements (including, perhaps, litigation).

If you see a problem, take the initiative to point out the issue, but never, never without a proposed solution. A good leader always has a plan. Employees have problems; leaders have plans. When you see, for example, an office problem between staff members, explain the problem, propose the solution, and include why that solution will work. If it is a routine issue, this can likely be done in two sentences or fewer. Not all issues will be so easily solved and most may involve more discussion, but you first want to explain the issue and a proposed solution to your manager. There may be issues you are not considering.

Employees have problems; leaders have plans.

Selling the Change

When office productivity issues involve a change in office procedure, it is always a good idea to discuss it in a staff meeting format to bring those who will be implementing the new procedure on board. First, they must understand the procedure. More importantly, the staff must understand why a procedure is being changed. If you do not have the staff on board, it is not likely that you will be able to implement change. Generally, people do not like change.

Such a discussion may take on a new format. Discuss the problem, invite solutions from all concerned, and then discuss your proposed solution. If your initial discussion involves only a problem and your solution, you have never offered the opportunity for staff “buy in,” nor the very real possibility that those actually doing the job every day may have better suggestions than your own solution. Leading change requires “a sell” with a positive attitude to bring those on board for successful implementation.

De Facto Mentors

If you run into a substantive issue in a case contrary to the way you have

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been running the case and need assistance from your senior partner, do not walk into her office with only questions. Think through the likely alternatives and propose a likely plan. Accept the possibility that you may be dead wrong — but perhaps you are not. You may be wrong because you may not have all the facts, but taking initiative shows you are thinking about the issues, not just reacting to a problem. Proposed plans shows you are acting as a team member, sharing your manager’s burden of representing the client and managing the case. This is the reaction of a practicing lawyer, not a young associate clicking tasks off a “to do” list. Acting as a team with your senior partner offers you the unique opportunity to enter into a mentor/mentoree relationship, without the formality of either of you having joined a firm or company program. You have appointed your senior partner as a de facto mentor, even if only for this one case.

Risk vs. Reward

It is important to remember that your efforts to make improvement must be genuine. Your efforts must be for the benefit of all involved, or you risk isolating yourself entirely. Take great care to not look like a renegade in your leadership efforts if you are without specific authority. If you lead up properly and with finesse, the rewards you reap are well worth the risk.

Partners can also lead up when they move in a different direction from their firms — a more positive direction. For example, think of those partners who, early in the days of flex-time scheduling, decided to endorse those policies. Those partners who presented polices to their firms for these ground-breaking moves were likely small in number and acting at the behest of many of their partners.

Whether the early flex-time pioneers were a success as a result of making the business case to implement this new way of practicing to their partners, or because making accommodations for others is the right thing to do, will remain the subject of debate, but flex-time is now working its way into some of the largest firms in the country. The concept continues to spread, albeit slowly, as a result of these partners who chose to lead their partners up.

Entire firms can also lead up and provide an example for those in their industry. For example, doing things such as greenspace renovations, which my firm recently undertook when moving to new space and renovating its San Francisco office. The new space features floors made of recycled local wood, countertops made from recycled plastic bottles, and non-toxic paint and finishes. Power to the office is 100-percent green. When firms undertake innovative moves such as this, they serve as models for — and leaders of — those in the industry.

Leading Down

If your environment lacks communication, take the initiative to start people talking. Really talking to your co-workers, subordinates and superiors is a simple and effective way to communicate. E-mail is one area where you can lead down to make communication better in your firm.

Too much communication in e-mail can sour relationships, and good managers need to be aware of the relationships (or lack thereof) around them. A good general rule is this: If an e-mail message is generally looking like the length of a short letter, it is too long. That message requires either an inter-office memo or a face-to-face meeting. A second instance when e-mail fails is if you have responded to a message and your response is met with another question, requiring further explanation. It is time for a short telephone call, rather than continuing with the e-mail exchange. You are obviously not connecting and are at risk for serious mis-communicating. Have an in-person discussion; make the connection and move on to your next task. In the long run, it will save you much time and effort. It will also preserve your relationship with your staff member, since continued questions only build frustration. Picking up the telephone or walking out of your office and responding in person can very quickly diffuse any potential problems.

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By showing your staff what you expect in communication, you are showing what is expected in their communication with each other. If a staff member brings to your attention e-mails from co-workers that they do not understand, suggest that the simple way to resolve this misunderstanding would have been to pick up the telephone or go talk to their co-worker in person. Perhaps next time, you will be left out of the loop (saving your time) as your staff learns the valuable tool of conflict resolution.

Communicating with members of your staff can be tricky, but as with any communication, knowing your audience is key. The Gen Xers, born 1960–1980, make up a large part of the workforce today and are a unique group to communicate with, specifically because they like their information fast. If the very senior partner is a Traditionalist and your paralegal is a Gen Xer, you may be bridging a constant communication gap; however, the first step to resolving any conflict is identifying the issues. The rest is up to you.

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Leading Sideways

There are many opportunities for leadership when dealing with peers. If you work in a small firm, your peer group may consist of all the associates within the group. Small firms do not have committees to delegate tasks such as organizing social gatherings. Become involved! Notice I did not suggest that you take all the work upon yourself. There is quite a difference. When you take the organizational lead and involve others in the process, it is good for both the organization and for your relationship with your peers. As with the risk vs. reward when dealing with superiors, there is always the chance that you will be viewed as “pushy,” or taking on these tasks only to move ahead in the organization. Just be mindful of your peers’ communication styles, and react accordingly.

Leading sideways also presents itself when dealing with teams if you work in a large organization. For example, you are preparing a client pitch and, although the experts are coming in from out-of-town and insisting upon a certain protocol while in the room with the prospective client, you have been dealing directly with the in-house counsel and have information contrary to what the experts plan to present. You must lead your colleagues sideways to be successful.

Leading sideways with difficult colleagues can be, at best, a negotiation. For example, if co-practice group leaders are at odds with regard to an important substantive issue in a pending case, it would be troublesome to the group for the co-practice group leaders to take different positions on the issue — an agreement is necessary. To further complicate matters, the partners have had a rather tumultuous relationship: One partner is a Traditionalist and the other an early Baby Boomer. Both leadership and communication styles are quite different. To further complicate the matter, each is of a different gender.

What To Do?

“Negotiation is necessary to solve a problem when both parties are equal, when each has the power to block the other’s attainment of its goal, or when both parties’ agreement is needed for a solution.”

Perhaps such an impasse between co-leaders is not so insurmountable, once the communication gap is closed. It will only take one of these leaders to “lead sideways” and close the gap.


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