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Follow the leader

More business services professionals are taking up leadership roles in the legal sector. But what skills are needed? Drive and ambition are prerequisites, but don't dismiss some of the 'softer' skills too?

More business services professionals across functions are rising to senior leadership roles in law firms. As discussed in our recent market report, others are taking up opportunities heading up new legal businesses offering complementary services.

While these new roles are clearly exciting for individuals and the wider management community in law, they require a broad set of leadership skills. Some are applicable to most industries; others are more unique to the legal sector. In this piece, we explore the trends that could help drive business leadership success in law.

A new business leader needs to be entrepreneurial, have drive, and be an agile and strategic thinker, but some of the latest research into what makes a good leader in today's business climate identifies several traits that may have once been seen as soft skills but are increasingly important.

Today's leader should demonstrate emotional intelligence, act with integrity, and be able to communicate, motivate and delegate. To some extent, these qualities reflect a wider change that is happening in society: businesses need to act responsibly, and the rise of the Millennial workforce that typically wants greater feedback and more personal fulfillment in their working lives.

It also makes business sense. A study by KRW Research Institute looked at four universal moral principles: integrity, responsibility, forgiveness and compassion. It then asked 8,000 employees at 84 companies to rank how their CEOs and senior teams performed against these traits. The researchers found that CEOs whose employees gave them high marks for character demonstrated a five times greater return on assets than those with a 'self-focused' leadership style, who never or rarely exhibit the four traits.

Research by McKinsey also identified four top leadership characteristics that explain 89% of the variance between strong and weak organisations in terms of leadership effectiveness. While you might expect that leaders need to 'solve problems effectively' and 'operate with a strong results orientation?', they must also 'seek different perspectives' and 'support others'.

Strong leaders encourage others to contribute ideas, give the appropriate weight to stakeholder concerns, and accurately differentiate between important and unimportant issues. Supportive leaders show authenticity and a sincere interest in those around them, build trust and inspire and help colleagues to overcome challenges. They also prevent internal conflict.

These traits seem particularly apt for business services professionals entering new senior roles in law. Change for some partners may be unwelcome. Getting internal support for a new business venture is key. Not every partner may buy-in to an idea initially but they may have some valuable contributions to make if handled in the right way. Diplomacy in a new business leader is also crucial.

Recognition, too, can make a big difference in getting buy-in. Harvard Business Review notes that praise directly affects morale and engagement. Seven out of ten employees who received some form of

appreciation from their supervisors said that they were happy with their jobs. Without that recognition, just 39% were satisfied. Frequency matters. Among employees who were called out for great work in the last month, 80% felt fulfilled at work but this dropped over time to 42% if that praise was more than two years ago.

More business services professionals will make it to the top of the legal profession. But in the journey upwards, they will increasingly find themselves under pressure to perform. Outright ambition will help drive success, but a leader who also has the softer skills will be more likely to bring the people in the firm with them on that journey. And in law, that skill is priceless.

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