

## Hiring Leaders

Tiffany M. Alexander

*If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.*  
-John Quincy Adams

The success of any business depends on the quality of its people. This is true whether the business is a law firm, a consulting firm or a Fortune 500 company. The challenge for firm and business leaders continues to be finding and retaining the best people with the skills to lead, innovate and grow the organization into the future. All too often, it is the lack of quality leadership which leads to employee disengagement and costly turnover. According to a recent Gallup study, “[O]ne in two employees have left their job to get away from their manager at some point in their career”.<sup>1</sup> In the legal profession, where time is money and the market is more competitive than ever, it is critical to build the most talented team to meet your client’s needs. While many studies have identified leadership traits, there remains great debate as to whether these traits are inherent or transactional, but it is safe to say that you know good leadership when you see it.

### 1. Hire for a purpose

The decision to hire should not be made lightly. It is important to first define the needs of your client, the nature of your practice and the skill set required to meet those needs. Hiring based on an immediate need, such as sudden influx of work, or a discrete project, is certainly inevitable, but if the goal is to bring consistency and cohesiveness to the firm, consider the role this candidate can play in mentoring and developing others in the firm and their potential for business development and marketing, and try to engage them on a larger scale than just the initial project.

For that to work, the candidate must possess the right skill set for the task and be the right fit for the firm environment. Work experience and education are always important, but perhaps more important are the skills that cannot be taught, such as confidence, personality, good verbal communication, drive and high moral character. In my years of experience hiring in business and the legal profession, some of the most successful hires had little to no experience with the posted position, but because of these “intangibles”, were very successful given the right training and mentoring.

That said, where the candidate does have experience, it may speak volumes to their true interests and ability to fit your hiring needs. For example, while hiring associates for a trial practice, many candidates told me they want to try cases, yet their work experience was completely unrelated to litigation, they never participated in a mock trial or jury research and didn’t take any practical courses in law school related to trial practice. Because there was no past indication of the slightest interest in trying cases, it was difficult to perceive how they could be the best fit for the firm’s business model or the clients we served.

### 2. Focus on the team

The most effective leaders leverage their own strengths to complement those of the team. If, during the interview, you ask a candidate why they want to join your organization, the response can be very telling. In some cases, candidates have told me that they want to join a successful firm so they can develop their own business and make partner. Compare that to the candidate that tells you their strengths align with the firm’s practice and they look forward to serving their clients’ needs as well as growing a successful client base. Both goals are fair, and likely true, but the “me” candidate will never motivate others to collaborate with them, which will leave a gaping hole in the leadership track. Look for the “us” candidate, who will be much more inclined to work with others to achieve a successful result for the client.

<sup>1</sup> State of the American Manager, Analytics and Advice for Leaders – © 2015

One method I've used with great success while interviewing associates is an ambush of sorts, engaging multiple associates who, unannounced, conduct their own interviews without any partner in the room. Associates who were hired after this "gauntlet" reported they enjoyed the opportunity to talk candidly with other associates about the firm environment, leadership and opportunities for growth. Likewise, the associates who participated enjoyed being a part of the selection process for the next member of their team, and felt invested in the success of the candidate once they started at the firm.

The value of mentoring and promoting from within cannot be overstated, and as we move up the ladder we have the obligation to reach back and give future leaders a hand to pull them forward. The successful hire will be a person who understands and ascribes to this, and who has demonstrated, through life or work experience, a commitment to collaborating with and helping others, such as coaching, community involvement or participation in social or political organizations.

### **3. Diversity and inclusion are essential for success**

No organization can thrive without a diverse team. With it comes diversity of thought, communication style and an innovative approach to resolving issues. Hiring a diverse team is half the battle, but inclusion is the key to long-term success. It is imperative that leaders create opportunities for diverse team members to play a meaningful role in litigation, negotiations and trial to keep them engaged and to achieve the best result for the client. Clients, juries and judges see right through the illusion when a diverse lawyer is at (or near) the table just for show, and the result is demoralizing and ineffective.

To do this successfully, leaders must confront inherent biases and ensure bias is not part of any hiring or work assignment decision. It is unfair to assume that an individual is not "suited" to a particular task or position because of their gender, family or childcare situation, race, nationality or sexual orientation, but it happens, inexcusably. Simply put, the client is best served with a diverse team and diversity of ideas, and a good leader will empower his or her diverse employees to that end.

### **4. Keeping leaders engaged after the hire**

Civility is critical for effective leaders. Leadership by intimidation may get the job done in the short term, but it cannot earn you respect. Creating an environment in which someone is afraid or hesitant to share ideas undermines the confidence of employees and fails the client. It is especially problematic in the legal profession, where advice and counsel is our most valuable asset. Individuals who stay in this type of environment are likely not leaders themselves and cannot lead the firm into the future. Instead, empower employees with clear and concise instruction, follow-up and constructive criticism where needed. Open lines of communication and creating an environment that encourages a full exchange of ideas is best for the client, and provides the "buy-in" that your employees need to stay engaged and productive.

--