

YOUNG LAWYERS

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LEADING AS LAWYERS AND CITIZENS

About five years ago, I saw a meme that showed a little girl with a caption reading, “I’m not bossy; I have leadership skills.” I would be willing to bet a good sum of money that almost every lawyer has been told at some point in their lives that they were bossy. It’s a characteristic that compliments many of the other traits lawyers are known for — intelligence, autonomy, communication skills, and analytical thinking. These are all necessary and important qualities for leaders to possess, especially in the legal field.

In the past few months, I’ve spent a great deal of time reading, listening to audiobooks, and asking questions of leaders I admire in order to gain a greater understanding of what it takes to be a good leader and how to develop those skills. In the process, someone asked me of an example of an effective leader and the qualities that person possessed which caused

me to form that belief. The leader I immediately thought of possessed three qualities that made her stand out: the ability to sincerely relate to those with whom she interacted; the ability to set forth a clear, strategic plan to accomplish her goals; and the ability to effectively communicate her ultimate goal and the plan she set in place to any potentially affected constituency. These three things, working together, resulted in substantial accomplishments and enabled success to be achieved, even under challenging circumstances. It was impressive.

While I may currently be in a leadership role with the Young Lawyer Section and the State Bar, I feel I still have so much to learn about how to be a more effective leader. In researching to write this column, I came across studies and leadership articles indicating that the hard skills we possess as lawyers

— knowledge of the law, strong verbal and written communication ability, and analytical thinking — may not be as important as the soft skills needed to be an effective leader. Most of the leaders I spoke with and whom I admire concurred, telling me that the most effective leadership skills are often the ones which have little to do with being a good litigator. Particularly, the most important soft skills relate to emotional intelligence, or our ability to manage and control our own emotions while understanding, with empathy, the emotions of those around us. Those we relate most to are typically those people we want to lead us. Being authentic, reading our own emotions, understanding where others are coming from, and treating others as we want to be treated are all signs of high emotional intelligence, and are necessary to be good leaders.¹

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Leadership is not always about lofty goals, big changes and watching it all work out perfectly. Sometimes leadership happens unintentionally. While I was excited to join the Young Lawyer Section as a delegate from Kanawha County, I certainly did not envision I would be the chairperson a few years later. It happened because as I got more involved, I wanted to help accomplish the goals of the group and bring our mission statement to fruition.

One of the articles I read specifically addressed the incremental brand of leadership and how it evolves.² In YLS, each representative signed up with the mindset to serve their constituency by completing the first step — putting ourselves out there for an election by our peers. But once a part of the collective group, we all feel compelled to take ownership of certain projects, see our objectives through, and deliver impactful changes so the group can continue to progress. The YLS is full of talented young lawyers who are dedicated in this way to moving our profession and our community forward.

Advancing our profession and our state is so important at this crucial time in West Virginia history. The judicial branch of government is imperiled and challenged, and leadership is needed. As lawyers, we lead every day by explaining the law and its implications to

our clients, and advising them on the best decision.³ This practice easily translates outside the office and the courtroom.

Lawyers do not have to be elected officials or hold a title of any kind to be leaders in our professions or communities. Young lawyers, in particular, are probably wondering how exactly they are supposed to lead when they are just starting out in their chosen career. The easiest way to learn how to lead is to volunteer to do something outside of your ordinary job responsibilities, like serving on the associate committee at your firm or getting involved with a nonprofit whose mission speaks to you. If that seems like too much early on in your career, start with baby steps, or what is known as micro-leadership. Here are a few examples:

- It's asking a reticent teammate for an opinion when they have been quiet the whole meeting.
- It's responding with kindness when someone greets you with anger or fear.
- It's accepting responsibility even when it wasn't your fault.

- It's sharing praise that was directed at you, with your teammates.
- It's being willing to say no when everyone else is saying yes, and being willing to say yes when everyone else is saying no.
- It's taking the time to thoughtfully share constructive feedback.
- It's asking the questions no one else will ask.
- It's arriving early to help set up, and staying late to help clean up.⁴

Once new lawyers get into the habit of volunteering for small roles, or even adopting micro-leadership characteristics, the desire to do more for our firms, our pro-

fession, and our community starts to take over. Incremental leadership begins, soft skills develop and supplement your legal skills, and you grow as both a person and a professional. Before we know it, West Virginia will be full of enthusiastic, bright, young leaders with a passion to lead, and a community that wants them to. That day cannot come soon enough. **WVL**

Endnotes

1. Tracy, Brian. "Why Emotional Intelligence is Indispensable for Leaders," *Forbes* (Oct. 30, 2017).
2. Budak, Alex. "How to Be a Leader When You are Not the Leader," *HuffPost* (Sept. 23, 2015), https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alex-budak/how-to-lead-when-youre-no_b_8181348.html.
3. Furlong, Jordan. "What Leadership Really Means," *Law Twenty One* (Oct. 31, 2014), <https://www.law21.ca/2014/10/what-leadership-really-means/>.
4. Budak, Alex. "How to Be a Leader When You are Not the Leader," *HuffPost* (Sept. 23, 2015), https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alex-budak/how-to-lead-when-youre-no_b_8181348.html.

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