

Effective Leadership: Perfection Is Not Required

Great leaders, whether in law or other fields, know that they don't know everything. Their openness to feedback and criticism helps develop the core effective-leadership trait of resilience.

BY AMBER AULT

In her book *Lawyers as Leaders*, Deborah Rhode, a professor at Stanford Law School, writes of the legal profession that “no occupation in America supplies a greater proportion of leaders, yet [it] has done little to prepare them for this role...”.¹ She notes that while most people like and appreciate their own lawyers, the legal profession “arouses great public distrust.”² She draws attention to the paradox that U.S. society looks to lawyers for leadership, and situates lawyers in positions of power and authority, while the reality is that too many lawyers do not know how to lead.

Understanding Leadership Styles

Rhode leans into the work of Daniel Goleman, who earned a Ph.D. from the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, worked as a science journalist, and authored the now classic book *Emotional Intelligence*.³ Goleman identifies six leadership styles and argues that effective leaders use all of them in any given week.

Here are the styles and how they are expressed:

- Coercive leaders demand compliance.
- Authoritative leaders mobilize others toward achieving a vision.
- Affiliative leaders create harmonious emotional bonds.
- Democratic leaders build consensus based on the willing participation of others.
- Pacesetter leaders expect self-direction and high achievement on the way to a goal.
- Coaching leaders focus on developing people for the future.

Think about a few people you've worked with or for and about their leadership styles. Did they predominantly use one of these styles or did they seem to be able to “code shift” between them when situations need it? Which style most inspires your desire to “follow” a leader? Which

have you found least inspiring? Which has made you feel most secure? Which has left you feeling resentful, frustrated, or disrespected?

As Goleman says, for leaders to be effective, they must be flexible. Leaders should change styles depending on context, audience, circumstance, and goals. Just as we wear different types of clothing for different occasions, good leaders have access to the better tools of each of these six leadership styles and the wisdom and skill to capably use them as situations require. Sometimes, it is most beneficial to be collaborative. Sometimes, it is most beneficial to make decisions independently. Usually, effective leadership incorporates both collaboration and independence.

Key Traits of Effective Leaders. Effective leadership requires flexibility, openness, curiosity, and humility. Great leaders know they don't already know everything, and they allow the



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strengths and talents of the people around them to be recognized, utilized, and rewarded. Effective leaders welcome criticism and feedback. Rhode notes that lawyers, like surgeons, are trained to be authoritative experts. Lawyers and surgeons are specialists in their subject areas, but the learning curve can be steep when they are put in positions of leadership because great leadership requires a degree of openness. It can be quite humbling for experts to receive criticism or feedback, especially from people in “subordinate” positions. The ability to accept feedback nondefensively, however, can be the “secret sauce” of powerful leadership, resulting in less group think, decreased narcissism, and the building of better teams.

To be open to feedback and criticism, let alone to experiencing failures and misfires, an effective leader must develop resilience, a trait that historically lawyers also do not rank high on. This might surprise some people, given the stereotype of lawyers as persistent and powerful. Lawyerly persistence doesn't necessarily line up with the image of people “low in resilience,” so it's important to sort these concepts out a little more.

The Importance of Resilience

What is resilience, and why might lawyers need to work to develop more of it?

The simplest definition is that resilience is the capacity to handle and adapt to adversity and to recover well from negative experiences.

Resilience is not merely “powering through” or “marching on.” That might be grit; it might be endurance; but it is not necessarily resilience. Resilience isn't martyrdom; resilience isn't “shop 'til you drop.” Resilience isn't drinking it off or eating one's feelings. Resilience is what psychologist David Schnarch called “meaningful endurance” or “grounded responding.”⁴ Resilience, in short, allows a person to figure out how to make lemonade from the lemons while not denying that the lemons are sour.

Resilience is not toxic positivity; it is seeing life as it is, greeting it with curiosity and creativity, and making it meaningful.

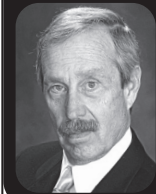
Resilience can be cultivated. While some people appear “naturally resilient,” most of us need to nurture our resilience. Key to resilience is adopting a philosophy that sees success as reflective of the capacity to learn from setbacks, mistakes, difficulty, and challenges.

When children are praised only for traits or talents (“you're so brilliant”), they trust that their successes depend on their special traits. Conversely, they often perceive negative outcomes as reflective of weaknesses or personal failings, rather than as a lack of mastery that could be addressed with additional practice or new knowledge. When kids are praised for effort (“you worked really hard on that”), which is under their control, they develop a stronger sense of the benefits of persisting through adversity. For kids who are gifted or talented, as many future lawyers are, intellectual tasks may come easy; the liability of such talent can be an absence of opportunity to cultivate resilience, making some very talented people fragile or brittle in their leadership styles.

Conclusion

Lawyers hoping to develop their leadership potential can benefit from seeing leadership skill as different from legal expertise and as a set of philosophies and practices that center on curiosity, nondefensive responses to criticism, openness to influence, self-reflection, an awareness of others' responses to us, and an agility with a range of leadership strategies to use with diverse people in varying circumstances. Learning from both successes and failures and shifting strategies as situations require is the heart of resilience, which is key to leadership. **WL**

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ENDNOTES

¹Deborah L. Rhode, *Lawyers as Leaders* (Oxford University Press 2013).

²*Id.*

³A 25th-anniversary edition of Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* was published in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing. The first edition, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*, was published in 1995 by Bantam Books.

⁴See David Schnarch, *The Crucible 4 Points of Balance*[™], Crucible Inst. (Jan. 17, 2011), <https://www.crucible4points.com/crucible-four-points-balance/>. **WL**