

BY ANDY KANEFIELD AND MARK POWERS

**D**on Lents, chairman of Bryan Cave LLP, an international law firm, believes that managing the firm according to its values is key to its success.

“We start with our core values, emphasizing a focus on building strong, enduring relationships — both with clients and internally. When we talk about who we are as an organization and what we need to do, we always come back to those values. They inform our strategic goals, and they inform how we operate internally.”

**How does knowing your values help with strategy?**

“We have always said as a firm that we are relationship oriented. Now, of course, that can sound trite since nearly every professional services firm says that. But, for us, there is an important additional meaning to being relationship oriented. We value serving as trusted counselors to and advocates for our clients, and the heart of our practice has always been broad-based, long-term client relationships.

“We don’t just parachute in for the latest case or deal. We are involved in the legal aspects of our clients’ day-to-day business activities. We understand their business and they understand us so that we can bring value through close, long-term relationships.

“An emphasis on that type of client relationship has significant implications for how you set strategy. For example, back in the 70s we concluded that, in order to continue to be the kind of partner to our clients that we wanted to be, we needed to be a national and even an international firm.

“This same commitment to our clients has also led us to add practice areas as they have emerged. Let me give you a few examples.

“We have significantly expanded our trade regulation practice well beyond its original roots in our Washington, D.C., office. We have also added cross-border trade and trade regulation capacity in a network of offices in Asia and expanded our capacities in Europe — a region of substantial activity for our clients. As a result, we have substantially grown our London office (which was established 25 years ago), adding not only depth but additional expertise in areas such as financial services, real estate, tax and employee benefits.

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"This expansion, of course, creates challenges as we evolve into a larger, more complex organization. It's something that our entire profession is still sorting out. How do you best structure such an organization to satisfy broad and complex client needs? When I entered the profession, large law firms had perhaps 100 lawyers and were in only one city. Now they can have a thousand attorneys across the globe."

**So how do you keep your firm aligned as you grow?**

"I think there are three important aspects to managing our alignment. First, we have a management style that is based on facilitation and coaching. In law firms, we have to recognize that our attorneys have options about whether or not to follow the firm's leadership. Leaders in law firms have influence but not authority in the traditional sense. We have to help our attorneys achieve their professional goals while strengthening relationships with clients. We are leading smart, capable, and driven people. Coaching allows us to influence them, without the same kind of resistance that efforts to assert presumed authority can engender.

"Second, there is a great need for clarity. We've used Jim Collins' three circles (What you are deeply passionate about/What you can be the best in the world at/What drives your economic engine) to help us create focus. It's a

clear and direct way to focus people's attention on what is at our core. It always brings us back to our emphasis on strong and enduring relationships with clients.

"Finally, we've learned to better understand how people think and what drives their behavior. I've learned a lot from the work of Larry Richard, a former trial lawyer who has studied the characteristics of attorneys. He's found that, as one might expect when looking at any specific group of professionals, there are differences between some of the personality traits of the typical attorney and of the average business person. What he has found reinforces our need to lead not from a position of authority, but from a position of influence."

**How do your values affect your internal behavior?**

"About 25 years ago, one of our partners articulated one of our core values this way: We treat our colleagues as we do our best clients. This describes a way of supporting and interacting with each other that is extremely important to us. It affects how we structure our operations and how we provide resources to help our clients. For example, we want to be in a position where when one of our partners has a client with a particular need, that partner can pick up the phone, ask a colleague to help, and that colleague will pitch in and help

## Traits of lawyers

Dr. Larry Richard is head of Hildebrandt International's Leadership & Organization Development Practice Group. He is recognized as a leading authority on leadership in law firms and lawyers' personalities.

Richard's research has uncovered the following patterns among lawyers:

- Skepticism is the highest scoring trait, averaging at the 90th percentile.
- Autonomy scores are at the 89th percentile.
- Urgency is another trait that distinguishes lawyers from the general public. Lawyers score roughly 20 percent higher than the

general public.

- Sociability scores for lawyers are dramatically lower as compared to the general public. Richard notes that rainmakers score much higher on sociability than service partners.

These findings and others lead Dr. Richard to suggest that better understanding of behavioral patterns "may offer insight to frustrated managing partners about why it's sometimes difficult to get your partners to go along with even seemingly simple management decisions."

SOURCE: HERDING CATS: THE LAWYER PERSONALITY REVEALED AT WWW.HILDEBRANDT.COM

## First among equals

The work of David Maister also has influenced Don Lents' approach to leadership in a law firm. In the book, "First Among Equals," which Maister cowrote with Patrick McKenna, the authors point out that leaders in professional service firms "often don't have subordinates or employees, or don't think of them that way. They have peers, collaborators, colleagues, co-

workers, and, perhaps partners. To be effective, you must act as *primus inter pares*, the first among equals."

The book is a how-to guide to "forging a cohesive team out of a group of autonomous individuals" who are "notoriously averse to being managed."

as if his best client were making the same request. Our lawyers regularly tell me that when they send an e-mail asking whether someone has experience with a particular question, they are constantly amazed not only by the wealth of expertise within the firm, but by the willingness of their col-

leagues to share their knowledge and to jump in and help."

*Andy Kanefield is president of Dialect, which helps leaders promote sync, that elusive state when departments and people are working in concert toward big picture goals. He can be reached at 314-863-4400 or [andy.dialect.com](http://andy.dialect.com).*