

Becoming a Better Leader: How to Overcome the Overly “Lawyer” Personality

Career Development



Lawyers, as professionals, are risk-averse and dislike change. But at the recent Corporate Legal Operations Consortium (CLOC) annual meeting, we were inspired to see all the exciting changes coming to the legal profession. The major players are reshuffling, new technology is rising, leadership roles are evolving — and now is the time for us to embrace and shape the future.

Larry Richard, a psychologist who studies lawyers, explains that personality attributes for about one third of any human behavior. “That may not seem like a lot, but it’s actually the largest single explanatory component ever identified,” he says. “In fact, every action and every interaction in a law department is affected by the personalities of the participants.”

Richard’s research over the past 30 years has shown that “lawyers tend to have distinctive ‘outlier’ personality traits that dramatically differ from the general public.” For example, according to Richard, lawyers tend to score much higher in the following traits than the general public: skepticism, autonomy, urgency, and abstract reasoning.

The lawyer personality

High skepticism “is the hallmark trait for lawyers,” according to Richard. They intuitively question assertions made by others, wonder about hidden motives, scrutinize decisions, and tend not to give others the benefit of the doubt. “Lawyers like to be in control and they don’t like others telling them what to do,” he adds. Similarly, patience is not a virtue for many lawyers. “They can’t stand waiting and they may finish others’ sentences,” says Richard. These traits are not always valued in the modern corporate world, where we expect business professionals be collaborative and inclusive.

“Abstract Reasoning — analyzing, solving problems, and using their intellect — is also a hallmark trait

of lawyers," explains Richard. "This trait lines up perfectly with the work that lawyers do." Richard continues, "In fact, it is the number one trait that explains who goes into law, as well as who stays in law. Yet in a corporate setting, overuse of this trait can lead to the classic 'analysis paralysis.'"

According to Richard, lawyers also tend to score lower than the public in sociability, resilience, and empathy. Richard explains that low sociability means "lawyers tend to prefer not to disclose a lot about their personal life. They tend not to pay as much attention to the personal lives of others and generally avoid vulnerability or interactions that they see as intimate, labeling both as 'touchy-feely.'" As a result, interactions with lawyers tend to be awkward and lack customary ease. "And nine out of 10 lawyers are low in 'resilience.' This means they are thin-skinned and get defensive easily," Richard adds.

The leader personality

"Effective leaders experiment, take risks, challenge the status quo, look for innovative ways to improve the organization, and accept any inevitable disappointments as learning opportunities," Richard explains. According to Richard, the combination of distinctive 'outlier' personality traits commonly found among lawyers is at odds with the personalities valued in leaders. Richard adds that leaders also "foster collaboration, build spirited teams, actively involve others, and understand the importance of mutual respect."

"Accomplishing extraordinary things in organizations is hard work. Leaders must keep hope and determination alive. They recognize contributions that individuals make. Leaders celebrate accomplishments so that members can share in the rewards of their efforts," says Richard. That sounds like a lot to remember, but Richard sums it up well: "Good leaders make others feel like heroes."

Reconciling lawyers and leadership

The disparity between the typical lawyer personality and the typical personality valued in leaders has some unpleasant consequences. "The kinds of personality traits that typify lawyers — and which can help them to be really excellent lawyers — can make it more challenging for them to be effective leaders," says Richard. The good news, however, is that with self-reflection, feedback, and practice, lawyers can overcome any "over-lawyering" tendencies and be seen as true leaders. "A mindful lawyer who is willing to mentally rehearse new thoughts and behavioral repertoires can dramatically improve their leadership effectiveness," says Richard.

Therefore, lawyers need to specifically work on developing characteristics that set them apart as leaders. For example, they must find ways to serve as role models, setting examples for others to follow. "Lawyers need to establish standards of excellence about how people should be treated and how goals should be pursued," Richard explains. He adds, "Lawyers must also find a way to inspire a shared vision and enlist others in their dreams." Breaking out of the lawyerly comfort zone ultimately means embracing collaboration, taking risks, and being more people-focused.

Although lawyers are often predisposed to be the near opposite of typical leaders, no lawyer needs to be limited by their "base" personality. Awareness is the first step. Once a lawyer realizes how they may be sabotaging their leadership potential, there are many opportunities to remold the typical "outlier" lawyer into a personable, valued leader. Richard's practical advice shows that you really can teach an old lawyer new tricks.

Olga V. Mack



Fellow

CodeX

Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg,

VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat, Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security and Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities. She is working on her next books: Visual IQ for Lawyers (ABA 2024), The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle (Globe Law and Business 2024), and Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data (Globe Law and Business 2024).

Katia Bloom



Commercial Lawyer and Associate General Counsel

ForgeRock

Katia Bloom is a fast-paced and strategic commercial lawyer. Currently, she is the associate general counsel at ForgeRock. Previously, she headed up legal for Avira, Inc., was a founding partner at E Squared Law Group, advising many start-up clients and was in-house counsel at Anesiva. She is actively involved in the Association of Corporate Counsel and a number of organizations promoting women in the legal profession.