

Career Path: How Much Should Bosses Care About Employees?

Law Department Management

Career Development



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Sometimes you learn important things about yourself accidentally. I learned something about my management style relatively late in my career. We had announced my successor, and one of my direct reports commented on the change.

He said, in all innocence, "The difference between your successor and you is that she cares about employees." Upon first hearing this, I had to laugh out loud. It was so outrageous, but he said it so straightforwardly. Then I remembered my Stoic lesson about how to benefit from feedback: First, consider the source and, second, consider the truth of the statement.

In this case, the source was someone I trusted, which gave me pause. On reflection, I had to concede my friend was probably right. That makes me sound like a terrible boss, and I suppose I was if my team was looking to me for to be their friend providing emotional support. But the legal team was a well-functioning and high-performing team, highly regarded by the business. This leaves me with the honest question whether caring for your team is necessary for their, or your, success.

The lone wolf howls with the pack ... sometimes

To understand many lawyers' leadership styles, it helps to reflect on our route to leading teams. Lawyers who spend time in private practice early in their careers usually work independently. Yes,

with a supervising partner and one or more senior associates. But junior associates are there to do grunt work and learn by doing. The senior lawyers are incredibly busy with little time and inclination for handholding.

I offer this as a description, not an excuse, for why lawyers typically learn little about team leadership in a law firm. Good role models are thin on the ground. The lawyers who advance do so largely on the strength of their individual contributions. (And don't feel bad for lonely associates. Partners may feel even less inclined to help partners on matters with which they're not directly involved.)

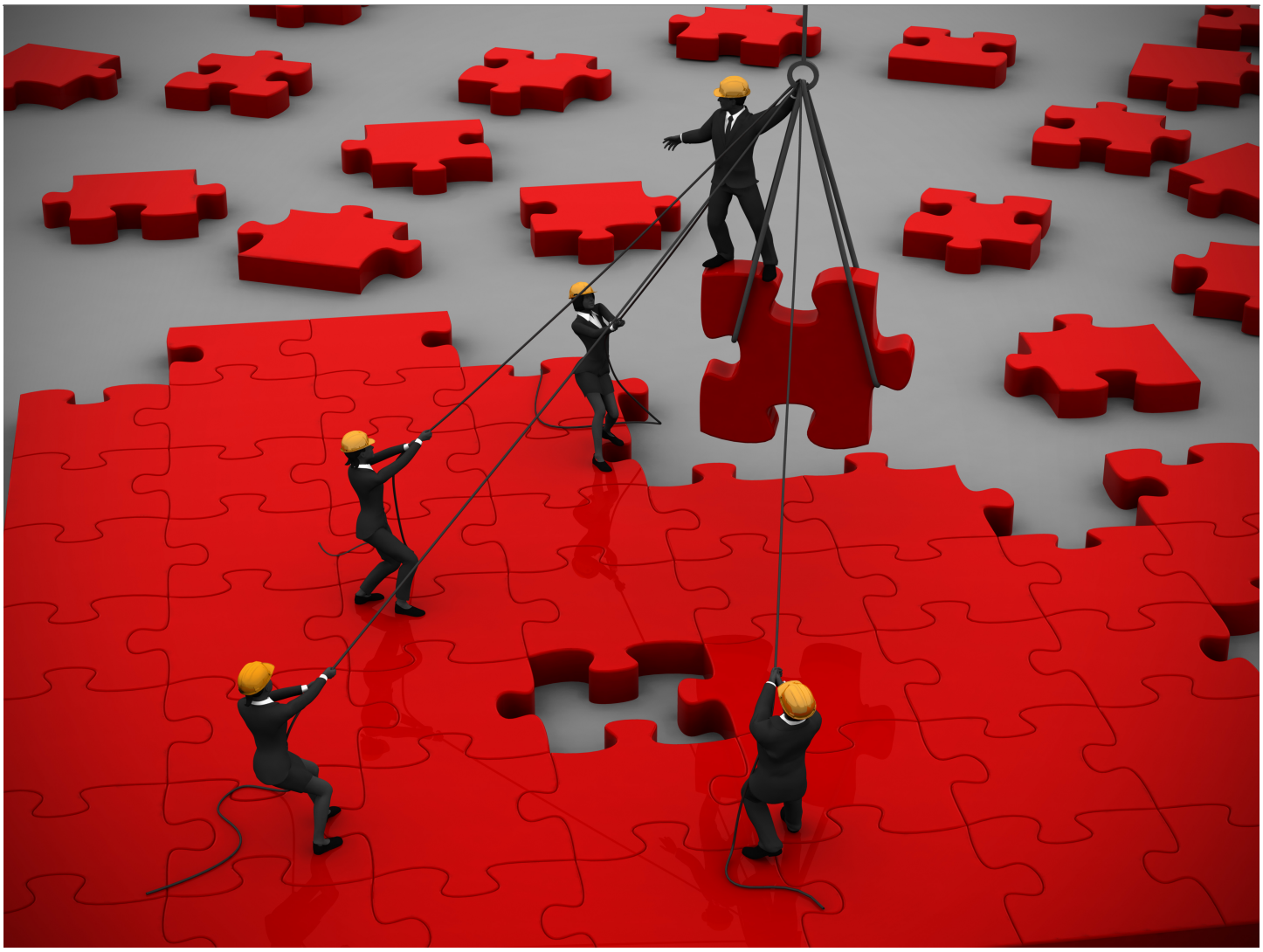
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Now let's say you've gone in-house. You may have started in-house directly out of law school, although I expect many in-house lawyers will have spent some time in private practice. If you did start in-house directly from law school, then everything you've learned about leadership you learned in the company environment. The good news here is that you've got many more role models for good leaders across the business.

The lawyers leading legal teams have a certain seniority. This comes typically from a mix of private practice and in-house time. The more a legal leader's experience comes from private practice, the less likely they are to have developed strong team leadership skills. If you've practiced 10 or 20 years in a law firm, you are probably a great lawyer with impressive legal experience. But you have a steep learning curve in managing your new in-house colleagues.

Outside habits — in-house reality

I only spent five years in private practice before getting hired as the general counsel of a freshly public company. I didn't come with too many bad habits, but I also brought no team leadership skills whatsoever. Our legal team was small in those days. From the start, I treated my colleagues like trusted professionals. I left them alone to do their jobs, because that's how I performed best and because they knew more about their jobs than I did. I kept interactions minimal, because I assumed that would help them work efficiently.



Leadership roles may often be crucibles that challenge our attitudes and approaches.
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We tackled challenges and grew the team as the business grew. I invested what always seemed like disproportionate time in personnel matters. Budgets, salary rounds, target setting, progress checks, annual evaluations. To say nothing of hiring new employees, having career development discussions, and finding ways to keep smart, ambitious lawyers suitably challenged but not overwhelmed.

I liked my colleagues immensely and was proud how much they could do. I made it my personal mission to provide the best working environment I could, which to me meant focusing on strategically relevant topics that were valuable to the company. Our lean team members became awesomely qualified corporate generalists.

Because I was a young general counsel, stable in the role, we couldn't satisfy the ultimate ambition for some. Most who left went on to lead legal teams of their own. I think it says something about our environment that we created so many successful general counsel. It certainly wasn't because I was an empathic leader.

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Sure, I got lots better at human resource topics. I recognized time spent on employee topics as a wise investment. I am still in touch with almost everyone who spent time in our legal team. For me, this was always in aid of serving company interests.

I reminded myself often that the decisions we made were business decisions, not personal. I could and did counsel underperforming employees, and fired many over my career, though thankfully very few in the legal team itself. I never liked it. Looking back, my discomfort at disciplining or terminating colleagues probably contributed a lot to my being friendly with everyone but not friends. Otherwise, how could it not be personal?

So, where do we go from here?

So now back to today's question. Is caring for your team necessary for their, or your, success? My answer is yes, but only to a point. You must care a lot to be successful. The best leaders I know care deeply about their companies and their companies' fate, so care about the individuals who work alongside them.

Can I care about your performance and want you to be successful without caring about your personal life? Put differently, because that sounds callous, do I need to know what's going on in your life outside work for you to do your best work? I don't think so, but I could easily be convinced that more empathy would help an already great team perform better.

If a leader has the emotional bandwidth to delve into their teams' private lives, wouldn't that be helpful? Helpful in the sense that people feel an even deeper connection to their colleagues? Feel understood and appreciated for more than their work product?

If it came naturally to me, I would have shown more interest. It doesn't, so I didn't. I am thankful to my team that everything worked so well for so long. But I am also happy for my team that they now have a boss that cares for them as well.

Be well.

P.S. Where do you come out on the question? Is your leadership style all business? Why or why not? Click the button to let me know what you think. Depending on your responses, I'll write a follow-up to share the wisdom.

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