



Positively Legal: Balancing Head and Heart

Career Development



Banner artwork by Naumova Marina / *Shutterstock.com*

More than ever we are being asked to manage increasingly remote departments while also overseeing the legal department's strategic vision. There are a number of basic principles that underpin the art of modern leadership that can help guide us in looking after both our people and our department by simply wanting to leave a legacy of positivity in our every interaction and vision.

Finding the balance between your head and heart

Leadership expert and business leader Kirstin Ferguson shares the eight attributes of a head and heart leader and how to integrate both in our leadership in her book [Head & Heart](#).

Ferguson identifies the “head” based attributes of modern leaders:

- **Curiosity** – Leading with curiosity means having a “genuine thirst for filling in gaps in your knowledge” by acknowledging and accepting that we do not have all the answers and do not know everything. Curious leaders want to learn, challenge assumptions, and rethink what they thought they knew.

[Research](#) shows that “people with high levels of curiosity also have greater levels of well-being and find enhanced meaning in life.” Curiosity allows us to approach difficult situations more creatively. Curiosity allows us to wonder why someone is disagreeing with us in an open way, show less confirmation bias, and share information more openly.

What stops us from being curious includes becoming set in our ways, and being scared of looking stupid. We can lead with curiosity by asking questions, avoiding assumptions, and listening before acting. For more on curiosity see my earlier articles [here](#).

- **Wisdom** – Leading with wisdom means assessing the knowns and unknowns and weighing the risks and rewards, looking for data or evidence, and then deciding the best way forward. Leading in this way includes making decisions without having all the data.

We benefit from this leadership because “a wiser outlook on life had been [found to positively impact our well-being](#) and levels of happiness including regulating our emotions and lowering the intensity of our negative emotions.”

What stops us from being wise leaders includes failing to understand our limitations, fearing rejection, and endlessly looking for data. Leading with wisdom includes being mindful of our decision-making process, reflecting on our past mistakes, and “finding a purpose beyond that of making money for the company.”

- **Perspective** – Leading with perspective means understanding the environment or context we are leading in and “making decisions on the best path to take to enable the best possible outcome” trying to see a few steps ahead and “understanding the implications before weighing up the best way forward.” Building perspective can include actively seeking data from a range of sources and tailoring our leadership for different individuals.
- **Capability** – Leading with capability means having a growth mindset “towards whatever it is they do whether a profession, trade, or hobby.” This means we continually learn but also lead in a way that “allows us to develop others to have a growth mindset as they develop their own capability too.”

Having a growth mindset allows us to build our self-efficacy. We can stop leading with capability if we feel uncomfortable learning something new, want to be the smartest person in the room, and also, interestingly by structural barriers. One study cited [found](#) 84 percent of workers who felt ready to use their capabilities were prevented by workplace cultures focused on speed, standardized routines, and processes. See my earlier articles on having a [growth mindset](#) and [building self-efficacy](#).



Being curious opens the door to many new experiences, opportunities, and a stronger sense of personal development. *mentalmind / Shutterstock.com*

Curiosity allows us to approach difficult situations more creatively and perform better.

Ferguson described the key attributes of those leading with their hearts as:

-
- **Humility** – Leading with humility means seeking out the contributions of others and accepting their limitations. They are open to new ideas and accept things are beyond our control. They are also eager to ask for contributions and do not see this as a weakness.

Humility is one of the stoic principles that “some things are within our control, and some things are not.” Humble leaders are described as owning their mistakes and acknowledging their limitations. We are stopped from being humble when we think leadership means being powerful and all-knowing, when we do not appreciate our limitations and when we confuse false humility with the real thing.

Leading with humility means understanding leadership is about serving others, having the courage to be vulnerable, being honest about our limitations, and praising others.

- **Self-awareness** – These leaders have a high level of insight into their character, abilities, and limitations. They are aware of the impact they have on those around them and are willing to change what doesn't feel right. Being self-aware helps us make better decisions. For example, if we recognize being micromanaged threatens our sense of autonomy, we will be less likely to resist any impulse to micromanage every detail of the work we ask others to do.

This kind of leadership promotes psychological safety. [Research shows](#) "teams lead by self-aware leaders are less likely to experience internal politics, backbiting, and toxic cultures" as the self-aware leader models what to do, including not dominating conversations.

Interestingly, self-awareness is said to require us to “become familiar with the signs our body is under stress” like a physical response (shortening of breath) and, when we feel this, “we need to slow down and self-regulate before we experience an amygdala hijack.”

- **Courage** – Leading with courage means speaking up for what they believe in. They will make decisions they believe are right even if pressured from others not to. These leaders create cultures where people feel able to speak up.

Leading with courage allows us to strengthen the corporate culture, find meaning, and alignment. [Research shows](#) “when we are able to be courageous and speak up safely, we feel in alignment with our full selves and feel more connected to others with greater purpose in our lives.” What stops us being courageous can be fear of consequences and lack of psychological safety.

- **Empathy** – Leading with empathy means being able to put yourself in another's shoes and understand their feelings. These leaders can listen to different points of view and understand that not everyone has the same experience or perspective. Leading with “the right kind of empathy in the right way at the right time can make the difference as to whether you can ever lead with people at the center or, instead, remain disconnected from the people around you.”

There are different kinds of empathy – emotional empathy is when someone is crying and you start to feel down whereas cognitive empathy is trying to understand why the person is feeling sad.

This leadership allows others to feel less stressed and depressed and more satisfied in their lives. “Leading with empathy is critical for innovation, positive customer experiences, and business success.” See also my earlier article on different ways to [bring empathy to our work](#)



Heart based leaders are very accountable, and display more empathy and compassion towards their team members. Alphavector / Shutterstock.com

Humble leaders are described as owning their mistakes and acknowledging their limitations.

Anyone who wants to know more about whether they are a head- or heart-based leader can complete the [Head & Heart Leader Scale](#).

How to get from good to great

Jim Collins' well known principles are set out in [Good to Great](#), identifying ways leaders can make a positive difference including characteristics of "Level 5" leaders who he identifies as having the highest executive capabilities. Level 5 leaders (or good to great leaders):

- Combine a mix of personal humility and professional will and are ambitious for the company and not to themselves;

-
- Display a compelling modesty by being self-effacing and understated;
 - “Look out the window to attribute success to factors other than themselves” but will look in the mirror when things do not go well and will blame themselves and take responsibility;
 - First look at “who” to get into the team and ensure they have the right team first and then they look at the “what” of driving organizational (i.e., the vision, strategy, structure, and tactics);
 - Are compellingly modest and shun public adulation; and
 - Good to great management teams consist of people who debate vigorously looking for the best answers but unite behind decisions.



Great leaders take full responsibility when something goes wrong, rather than blaming their peers.
jesadaphorn / Shutterstock.com

Being a net positive leader

In [Net Positive](#), Paul Polman and Andrew Winston describe how companies thrive when they give more, and this also applies to leaders. They identify the five critical net positive traits for leaders:

1. **Having a sense of purpose, duty, and service** – In the net positive sense, it is answering “What do you uniquely do to make this a better world?” For more tips, see my earlier article on [finding meaning and purpose](#).
2. **Empathy or a high level of compassion, humility, and humanity** – IKEA’s CEO Jasper Brodin said, “Believe in yourself and your strengths ... but don’t forget to rely on other

people's strengths too. Because we are truly stronger together.”

3. **More courage** – Polman and Winston think of all five traits “courage rules them all,” they think, “Empathy and a sense of purpose give you courage to make decisions you wouldn’t otherwise, to go the extra mile, and to push through discomfort” because net positive leaders go after the biggest challenges.
4. **The ability to inspire and show moral leadership** – A leader’s responsibility is ultimately about inspiring and uniting people behind a common purpose. “It’s the ability to motivate and mentor others to higher levels of performance, help them find their own clear sense of direction, and figure out how to express that purpose.”
5. **Seeking transformative partnerships** – Working well with diverse groups is the “new leadership skill – putting yourself in par with all partners, or even being of service to them, requires humility.”

Lessons from women leading

Finally, we can gain further ideas from indigenous women and their leadership. In the book [Women Leading](#), the leadership principles from “talking circles” included:

- If you want people to listen to you, you have to listen to them;
- If you hope people will change how they live, you have to know how they live;
- If you want people to see you, you have to sit down with them eye to eye.

Tips for leading teams and building strategic vision

We can learn from the principles above and put them into practice by:

Cultivate curiosity and being open and interested in learning more about the legal team as well as other parts of the organization.



Take time to find your true purpose and work with team members that can help support your vision within the legal department. [depOverearth / Shutterstock.com](#)

- **Learning how we lead from Head & Heart** – take the quiz and then work on strengthening the way you work and understanding what might stop you from exhibiting those strength areas;
- **Taking the time to find a team that displays the qualities of a strong leader (because everyone is a leader)** – this includes humility, curiosity, and self-awareness;
- **Leading with empathy** by considering the challenges of any remote team members and consider everyone in the team has different needs and perspectives;
- **Finding your purpose and meaning** and bring that to your team and environment. Then discuss with your team what their purpose and meaning is and how it aligns to the strategic vision you want to create in the legal department and how it supports the organization;
- **Cultivating curiosity and being open and interested in learning more about the legal team as well as other parts of the organization** – this may help break down barriers with stakeholders and work better together;
- **Finding ways to praise your team members** and find ways to build their self-efficacy and capabilities for the longer term;
- **Leading with a mix of courage and humility** – being humble enough to stop and consider whether what you want to do is the best course of action and then, if it is, acting with courage (but also using empathy to consider those who may not agree with the action in the business); and
- **Leading by inspiration** and help people to find their challenges and stretch themselves

within a safe and blame free environment.

All of the principles above can help you to successfully lead and manage your team and can also help to underpin a strategic vision for the future.

[Join ACC](#)

Disclaimer: The information in any resource in this website should not be construed as legal advice or as a legal opinion on specific facts, and should not be considered representing the views of its authors, its authors' employers, its sponsors, and/or ACC. These resources are not intended as a definitive statement on the subject addressed. Rather, they are intended to serve as a tool providing practical guidance and references for the busy in-house practitioner and other readers.

[Caterina Cavallaro](#)



Deputy General Counsel

VGW Holdings Limited

Caterina Cavallaro is deputy general counsel at VGW.

She combines technical legal skills with practical business understanding and a love of innovation, project management, and legal technology to improve ways of working within the legal industry. She is a member of the ACC's In-House In-Health and Legal Technology and Innovation Special Interest

Groups.

In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.