

# Leadership Skills for Women Lawyers

## - Unlock the secrets of the legal maze

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The challenges and tensions currently facing many women lawyers is how to maximise their talents, proactively manage their careers whilst juggling the never ending home/ family commitments in what is still a man's world. Faced with the grim fact that in July 2007 only 21.8% of women solicitors were partners compared to 49.9% of men and women are paid on average 21% less than their male counterparts (17% less as new entrants) what can you do?



Much has been written the factors affecting women lawyers - commitment to family / personal responsibilities, lack of: flexibility, client development opportunities, general management experience, mentoring opportunities, exclusion from informal networks within the firm and lack of female role models. Larger firms are attempting to counter this by introducing Women Initiatives, maternity coaching etc.

But what if you are not in such a firm or cannot wait for the long promised cultural change when all will be fair in love, war and partnership? The options are either vote with your feet, accept your lot, or become a leader – negotiate the legal maze and do business on your terms.

Leaders do business on their terms. They find out the rules of the game understand them and then use them to their advantage. Acquiring leadership skills helps to increase your confidence, personal power and circle of influence. Clients want trusted advisers who exhibit leadership qualities.

How many lawyers do you know who are great leaders? How do you become one?

You are only a leader if people are prepared to follow you. The common characteristics identified in leaders are vision, integrity, "can do" attitude, passion, excellent communicators etc.

Until now many firms have adopted a smoke and mirrors approach to management and partnership. Many lawyers don't have a clear job description or a firm idea as to what is required to reach partnership level. Indeed many partners are unclear about the criteria!! As a consequence many lawyers feel that they are operating in a vacuum. If Tiger Woods were challenging for partnership he would be lining up for the final putt only to find that the flag had moved!! The style of leadership required to lead a 21-century law firm is also changing. A command and control style of leadership is still very much in evidence in the legal world. However the world is changing and it is becoming increasingly important to win hearts and minds.

The legal public sector has led the way and countered this lack of certainty by introducing competency frameworks. Law firms are now following suit. Key competencies of a role are defined and drawn into a framework. Within each core competency there are descriptions of performance.

<b>Direction</b>	Leadership	Diversity Awareness & Management	Business Development
<b>Management &amp; Communication</b>	Communication & Negotiation	Planning & Organisation	Achieving Results
<b>Personal Contribution</b>	Continuous Self Development	Specialised Skills & Knowledge	Reasoning & Decision Making

Figure 1 Suggested Competency Framework for a Senior Associate

An interesting example of a legal competency framework in action is the Serious Fraud Office's readily available on the Internet at...

[www.sfo.gov.uk/careers/files/G7%20Lawyer%20Benchmark%20Profile%202008.pdf](http://www.sfo.gov.uk/careers/files/G7%20Lawyer%20Benchmark%20Profile%202008.pdf)

In the Teamwork and Leadership category a level 4 (equivalent to senior associate level) would be expected show

*"clarity and decisiveness on issues relating to the team's objectives and standards. Stands firm on key issues"*

*"Balances the need to maintain an overview with the requirement to play a more active role in the detail of the work; knows when to step back and when to be hands on"*

*"Drives the team to ensure delivery, keeping momentum going over time"*

**But do you think of yourself as a leader?** (You do not need a formal "leader badge" to be one). Influencing and persuading are skills that you use on a daily basis with clients and colleagues. Advocacy is all about having that all important "presence".

Another key success factor to progression within a firm (often ignored) is the ability to network and bring in business to boost partnership profits. It is no longer enough to be a great lawyer. Many lawyers cringe at the very thought and are expected to network and develop the business on top of their "day" job. Yet little time is devoted to learning this vital skill. Like advocacy it is a skill, where your confidence grows over time and with experience once the process and etiquette is understood. Put bluntly the ability to network builds your power base and offers a chance to unlock the secrets of the legal maze.

### Suggested action points

1. Brainstorm the characteristics of good leaders
2. Write down all the existing skills and strengths you have
3. Get ahead of the game - Find out what the partnership criteria actually are. Not interested in partnership? The information is still useful to know as it could inform decision-making re reward etc.
4. Compare your list with your leadership list. What do you need to improve, develop or do differently?
5. Finally create an action plan to take your leadership skills to the next level.