

## NEW PARTNERS

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# Leadership 101

*It takes values, a vision,  
a plan—and good communication skills.*

BY JAY SULLIVAN

**A**T SOME POINT in the discussions with your firm about becoming partner, you realized that the “promised land” that you had been viewing over the wall was, in fact, a heavily tilled and managed garden that required a lot of work to maintain. The partner landscape today involves heavy emphasis on partner production rates, work generation credits and responsibility to participate in more committees than you realized the firm had. For some, the euphoria of making partner wears off faster than the buzz from the celebration your spouse threw for you.

We all know people who went to law school simply because they couldn't think of anything else to do. No one becomes a partner at a firm because he or she “couldn't think of anything else to do.” It takes too much work.

Becoming partner took dedication and strategy, and probably a little bit of luck. The planning that allowed you to make it to partner is evidence that you want more than a job—you want a career.

That career path doesn't end with partnership. If you made partner in your 30s, and plan to work until your 60s, it's silly to think that you won't grow and develop for the next 30 years. The planning that it took to reach this point was really just practice for the planning that will take you to the next level.

### **You Are Now, De Facto, a Leader**

Every partnership role at a firm is, de facto, a leadership role. However, not every partner is a leader.

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Those who rise above just having solid lawyering skills are those who distinguish themselves and place themselves in the running for more significant roles at the firm. Regardless of how you define yourself within the firm and within the legal community at large, you will have to demonstrate leadership skills, whether to lead your practice group, lead your office, lead a particular initiative for the firm or lead ideas for your specialty in the larger business community.

In any bookstore you can find shelf after shelf of books on leadership. Most are written by current leaders in business or politics or sports. Each has its own five-point plan or seven-step structure or 10-element pyramid principle.

Each of these books is worthy in its own right and each is repetitive of the elements that you already know: Your leadership ability depends in large part on your ability to determine what you stand for, where you want to take your followers and how you want to get there, often referred to as your values, your vision and your plan. And, because one skill common to all effective leaders is the ability to articulate each of these elements, superior communication skills is an essential part of your leadership ability.

The one absolute necessity of a leader, of course, is a group of followers. Without other people, all of the other elements of leadership leave us nothing more than unfulfilled potential. Leadership is, therefore, all about others—the ability to connect with them, the ability to inspire them,

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and the ability to guide them. It's not about you, it's about others.

Let's look at how you can communicate your values, your vision and your plan, whether in writing, when speaking or when meeting with others. In each section we will focus on structuring your message in such a way that your reader or listener can most easily follow your thoughts and therefore be more likely to stay with you. We will also consider the best language to use when communicating complex ideas. You have a better chance of keeping others following you if you make it effortless for your followers to understand your vision and your path.

### What Are Your Values?

Strong leaders know themselves. They understand both their strengths and weaknesses and accommodate both—they leverage their strengths and account for their weaknesses.

Some people are innately introspective and therefore have a firm understanding of who they are and how they view themselves in the context of society. Others need help in putting language to what they know about themselves.

Many personality profiles exist, both simple and complex, that can help you understand yourself. For the purpose of discussing your communication skills as a leader, we will assume you have already grappled with and come to some conclusion about who you are. Now the challenge becomes putting words around that personal message.

According to Michel de Montaigne, "It's the journey, not the arrival that matters." A leader takes his or her followers on a journey.

How do you describe what you stand for in a manner that makes your audience want to join you in that trek? There are two steps you must consider when you explain to others the journey on which you want them to embark. First, the message must be about how your values impact your audience, rather than just about you. Second, the language you use must be effortless for your audience to understand.

Political leaders tend to describe their values with greater clarity than leaders in industry, sports or the military, in large part because their description of themselves is what gains them their positions. Successful U.S. presidents have described themselves with a wide array of values.

Harry Truman made a point of saying, "The Buck Stops Here," making accountability to the American people the cornerstone of his ethos. Teddy Roosevelt's "Walk softly but carry a big stick," was reinforced by his "Don't hit at all if you can avoid it, but never hit soft." His words helped Americans feel strong and secure on the world stage as the nation approached its adolescence. John Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" was his way to make personal service the principle that would lead to achievements like the Peace Corps.

Whether your statement of values focuses on integrity or valor or street-smarts or anything else, you must be able to phrase your values as being about others. In Table I below are some common attributes of a leader, explained to an audience using both leader-centered and audience-centered language.

In most business settings, we don't have the opportunity or need to discuss ourselves or our plans on a vast philosophical basis. Most of our days are less "rendezvous with destiny" and more "committee

meeting at 3 P.M." Nevertheless, our message about ourselves remains important (see Table II below).

In each case, by phrasing the content from the audience's perspective, you as a leader will have a better chance to connect with that audience and encourage its members to join in the journey.

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### Use Clear Language to Inspire

Once you have adopted an audience-centered mind-set, you then have to select the right language.

As Napoleon Bonaparte said, "A leader is a dealer in hope."

Leaders inspire. Your challenge is to describe your values to others in language that motivates them. Some key points and suggestions for understanding your natural inclinations regarding language:

**1. Always Remain Upbeat.** No one wants to follow a sourpuss. Your message must talk about striving to improve, not about avoiding difficulty. That's why Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" campaign provided a welcome respite from the dour message of resignation that Jimmy Carter seemed to embody.

**2. Use Simple, Direct Language.** You don't motivate people by impressing them with your vast vocabulary. You get them on board when they easily understand your message. With the right language, you can phrase key ideas simply and significantly.

Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address was only 701 words long, 505 of which were single-syllable words, and yet "With charity toward all. With malice toward none." rings in our ears as the epitome of elegance.

Re-read your latest speech, presentation or memo. Did you use any words that would qualify as jargon or your own unusual word choice or

punctuation? Did you use acronyms with which certain members of the audience might not have been familiar? Ask yourself if your audience would have intuitively understood the language that you used.

I once worked with a law firm partner who liked to end his e-mails with an "...". He viewed it as his personal trademark. Unfortunately, it added confusion to every message he sent. The recipients couldn't tell if he had finished his thought, or left something out, or if they were supposed to be able to "fill in the blank." His attempt to create a signature style hampered his effectiveness. You want to impact others with the quality of your ideas, not with your quirky habits.

**3. Keep Your Sentences Short.** Once a sentence approaches 20 words long it becomes cumbersome. Your listeners and readers will find it harder to grasp concepts hidden in long sentences.

Again, consider your last memo. Count the number of words in each sentence for at least 10 consecutive sentences. Determine the average. Is it below 20? If so, you are starting in a solid position.

**4. Pay Close Attention to the Verbs You Use.** Review your last speech or key memo to your staff. Circle the verb you used in each sentence. How often does the verb describe real action? How often did you use weak verbs such as "is," "are," "was," "were," "has," or "have"? What other word in the sentence would have described better action? Some simple examples:

*Weak verb phrasing:* We are hard working.

*Better verb phrasing:* We work hard.

*Weak:* Our structured finance group is the leader in the industry.

*Better:* Our structured finance group leads the way.

*Weak:* Our clients are pleased with our work.

*Better:* Susan wanted me to tell you how much she appreciated all our hard work.

**5. Use the Word "You" a Lot.** We are all basically self-focused. And to other people, our issues are always, simply out of necessity, secondary to their own issues. You get better responses from people when you talk about them rather than yourself.

Search your entire document for any personal pronouns. (I, me, my, mine, you, your, we, our.) If you have fewer than five personal pronouns per

<b>Table I</b>	
<b>Leader-Centered Language</b>	<b>Audience-Centered Language</b>
I stand for integrity.	You deserve someone you can trust.
I want the world to be a better place.	Your children deserve a more just society.
I believe in hard work.	You want a leader who works as hard as you do.
<b>Table II</b>	
<b>Leader-Centered Language</b>	<b>Audience-Centered Language</b>
I want a better work environment.	You deserve a civil, open workplace.
I believe in work-life balance.	You want to see your kids on more than just the weekends.
I want us to be known as the best structured finance team in the country.	You want to be part of a nationally recognized and respected team.

hundred words, see where you can add some. Aim for two “you”s for every “I.” Remember, it’s about them, not about you.

## Your Vision

To lead people, you must know where you want to take them and articulate it clearly for them.

Your vision is broader than a set of specific actions, but more concrete than a vague statement of ideals. It’s a long-range goal of how you want your firm or your company’s legal department to be structured and function. It is, ultimately, where you are telling your followers that they are headed.

Reagan’s values of optimism and individual responsibility became articulated as a vision of smaller government. Martin Luther King Jr. verbalized his quest for equality through his vision that his children could one day be “judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

Leading is about others. But leading others to accept their lot in life or to be complacent or to wallow in their own pity isn’t the goal of a positive, effective leader. Great leadership is about challenging and motivating others to achieve, to improve and to grow.

As with your statement of values, your vision must both be about others rather than you, and be expressed in language that engages and motivates others. Whether your vision is about creating the most respected M&A practice in the country, about doubling the size of your Cleveland office, or about developing a reputation as creative problem solvers for your clients, you have to express the ideas with the same clarity you expressed your values.

If you reviewed the minutes of your last partner or staff meeting, would you read a clearly articulated statement of where your firm is headed? How much of the language pertains to your group’s performance to date, rather than the goal for the next 12 months? Does where you are now bear any resemblance to the goal you set for yourself last year? If the current plan is not designed to get you where you want to go, determine if the goal is SMART—specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound. If your vision doesn’t meet these criteria, you can’t achieve it.

## Now, Communicate Your Plan

Once you have articulated your vision and everyone understands where they are headed, you must determine what steps are needed to reach that goal. As with your values and your vision, when you communicate your plan, you must stay focused on your followers’ needs and use language with which they can connect.

For instance, your firm determines that doubling the size of your tax group is essential to staying competitive. The management committee will undoubtedly convey to the entire partnership what steps must be taken to make this happen.

In business, we tend to be very good about telling the people below us in the organization what has to happen. We tend to be exceptionally good at telling them when it has to happen. (Yesterday would be nice.) However, we often come up short when conveying why the goal is important. Even when we do cover the why of an issue, we often forget to

focus on the why from the perspective of the individual we want to lead. From whose perspective do we explain why?

**Why** from the firm’s perspective: *To maintain this firm’s reputation for excellence.*

**Why** from the practice group’s perspective: *To help the Real Estate/Tax/M&A group become a key driver of revenue for the firm.*

**Why** from the associate’s perspective: *To give you greater professional opportunities and a richer career.*

Obviously, the closer we can tie a particular set of objectives to the individuals we seek to lead, the better chance we have to connect.

## How to Structure Your Message?

You will be more effective as a communicator if you spend less time talking about yourself and your ideas and more time talking about how your ideas meet the needs of your audience. Your goal, therefore, is to structure your content around the audience’s needs.

As a leader, your public speaking purposes fall into three general categories: to persuade, to inform, and to inspire.

**To Be Persuasive.** If your goal when speaking is to get the members of your audience to take action, structure your material around the benefit to them if they follow your advice. The structure is simple:

1. Grab their attention.
2. Tell them what you want them to do.
3. List the benefits to them of your suggestion.
4. Prove to them that those benefits will indeed flow to them if they follow you.
5. Summarize what you want and why they should want to follow.
6. Describe your action steps.

When you want to persuade someone to do something, you shouldn’t spend all of your time talking about what you want. You should focus instead on why they should want it.

**To Inform.** Occasionally, you need to simply provide a status report on a project or convey content, rather than to convince someone to buy into a new idea. In that case, you want to ensure that your thought process is absolutely transparent to your reader or listener. The structure is, again, very simple:

1. Grab their attention
2. Provide a quick overview of the topics you will cover.
3. Cover each topic in turn.
4. Summarize by restating your topics.
5. Tell the audience your next steps.

When you provide a status report, the “next steps” are generally limited to when they should expect another update, or where they can go for more information.

When you need to persuade, the goal is to make it clear that you are focused on the benefits to the audience. When you need to inform someone about a topic, the format itself becomes the true benefit to the reader or

listener because you allow the individual to find quickly the information that interests him or her most.

**To Inspire.** When you want to inspire people to move forward, stories will drive your message.

When you inspire, you aren’t selling people widgets. You are selling an idea. Most of us cannot process an idea on its own. We need a context, a story, an example, an anecdote—to make the concept real. That’s why law school, where the content is all conceptual rather than concrete, is driven by stories. We learn the concepts by reading cases. The cases are the stories that bring the concepts to life.

When you want to inspire your audience, hone the message that you want to be taken away, then reflect on the stories from your experience that demonstrate the point you want to make. You should keep your stories short and upbeat. You should focus the story on the very specific point you want to convey.

## Your Actions Are Crucial

Our actions speak louder than our words.

As a leader, you can talk a good game about supporting others, but if you consistently arrive late for meetings or play with your BlackBerry device while others speak, your lack of consideration is what people notice, comment on to each other and factor into their overall impression of your professionalism and stature.

You are a busy professional. So are the people whom you want to have work with you. Your consideration of their time commitments and their need for the information that only you can provide contribute in large part to their willingness to get behind your ideas.

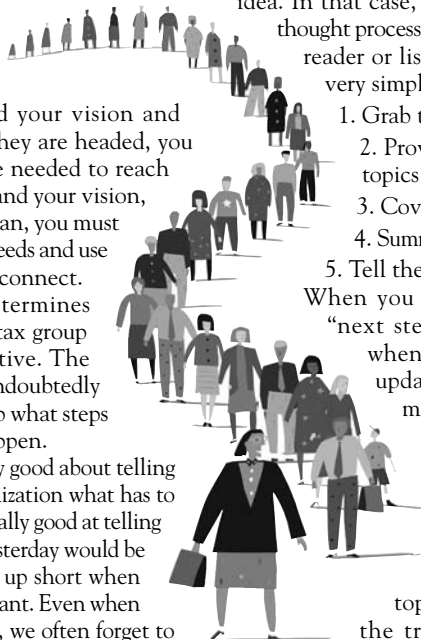
## In Summary

As you develop your leadership skills, consciously consider how you have verbalized your messages about your values, your vision and your plan. Then consider how your actions have reinforced or detracted from those messages.

The members of your audience absorb information as a package, factoring in both what you say and the way you say it. They then compare the words with the actions lived. Many people constantly watch for inconsistencies. Your job as a leader is to ensure that the message they hear from you matches the message they experience from you daily.

By making partner, you have achieved a leadership role in your firm. Congratulations. But don’t view it as a reward for past performance. View it instead as a vote of confidence in the values you project, the future you envision for the organization and the strategic skills you have demonstrated thus far.

Being given a leadership role is recognition that you have consistently put the greater good of your firm ahead of short-term benefits to yourself. The reward part is more intrinsic: It’s the opportunity to see your values and vision acted upon by your followers. Ultimately, your leadership isn’t about you. It’s about others.





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