

Leadership Lessons Learned: Confessions of a Prosecutor

BY JACKIE LACEY

YEARS AGO my husband, David, and I bought our first house. We spent a great deal of our money on the down payment and had very little money to fix it up. The interior of the home needed painting. We decided we would paint it ourselves. My husband is an accountant and I am a prosecutor. We had never painted a house before. But the home improvement store commercials made it look so easy we decided to give it a try.

The Friday before the weekend we were scheduled to paint, I was leaving my office when I noticed a man standing on a ladder painting the hallway of the office. I stopped to ask the man for tips on how to paint. Without leaving the ladder he looked me up and down from head to toe. I was wearing a blue pinstriped suit. I had a professional French manicure. I had a briefcase and I was wearing expensive shoes. He went back to painting and he said the following words, “I will give you a tip — hire a painter.” He went on to lecture me about the skill needed to paint and everything that was required to do a good job. He ended with a statement that stayed with me for nearly 30 years: “*Everyone thinks they can paint but everyone can’t paint.*”

I did not listen to his advice and David and I did paint the inside of our house. We made of mess of things. It did not turn out well.

The painter’s advice applies to so many situations. It is especially true with leadership: “*Everyone thinks they can lead but everyone can’t lead.*”

Just like a good painter, to be a good leader you must have the vision to see what a project will look like before

you begin. You must be patient enough to do the prep work. You must develop a steady hand and be able to work consistently until the job is done. You must be able to clean up the spills and make it look like nothing ever happened. You must pay attention to the price of everything. You must be a good time manager. You must be able to leave a place looking a lot better than when you started.

I learned some of the most important leadership lessons, not so much from my successes, but from my failures.

Approximately 13 years before I became the district attorney I was appointed to my first management job. I was not prepared.

THE CHALLENGES

I had no prior experience supervising anyone but my children. It turns out that that wasn’t a bad thing as many of the principles I employed in raising them would prove helpful as a manager.

I had no knowledge of the details on the inner workings of staff. I had to learn their job duties. I had no knowledge of employment laws that regulate sexual harassment, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Family Medical Leave Act.

In addition to my management duties I was now a reg-



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ular adviser to the elected district attorney. I found myself competing to be the most influential person to the boss. The most influential person is perceived as the most powerful person in the office. On more than a couple of occasions I would wonder “Why won’t he listen to me? I have all the answers.” The truth of the matter was I couldn’t have had all of the right answers as I had yet to see the big picture.

I engaged in turf wars with other managers. There was one man whom I fought with the most. It seemed we didn’t agree on anything and I took his contradictory statements personally. I felt that he was purposely undermining my authority and dismissive of my views. It didn’t help that he had more influence on the boss than I.

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Being in charge of others was stressful. At first it was impacting my health. I am a workaholic; I could work non-stop. I later learned to use my faith and exercise to manage the newly added stress to my life. Before becoming a leader I exercised to lose weight. After I became a leader I exercised to maintain clear thoughts.

I learned that in my new role I was like an automatic teller machine for people who had complaints. I learned how to manage the long line of people with “concerns.” I learned which concerns needed to be addressed immediately and which ones would naturally go away if I waited to respond. I learned that 75 percent of the complaints you get

would disappear if you would only request that people put it in writing. People hated putting things in writing unless it was really important.

I have a sense of humor and that can create predictable problems when you are managing people. You should never make jokes about someone in front of an audience if you write their performance evaluation. I learned that the subject of all jokes had better be me if I didn’t want to be accused of bullying, embarrassing or, worse yet, harassing someone.

I had to overcome the myth that if I am a good trial lawyer then I would naturally be a good leader. In my office prosecutors are promoted to management jobs as a reward for winning trials. The combativeness that makes you a good trial lawyer can make you a harsh leader. Good leaders should inspire and encourage, not dictate and belittle.

I couldn’t delegate work when I first started out as a leader. Secretly that was rooted in my belief that no one could do it better than I could. Now I know everyone can do it better than I can.

The most difficult group to lead in my office was prosecutors. I think that as leaders of prosecutors we need to understand them. Colorado Attorney General John W. Suthers wrote the best book I have ever read on understanding the mind of a prosecutor. Attorney General Suthers was a district attorney and an assistant United States attorney before he became the attorney general. In his book entitled “No Higher Calling, No Greater Responsibility—a prosecutor makes his case,” (2009) he noted: “*Prosecutors have a sense of righteousness...a well developed and largely uncompromising sense of right and wrong.*”

Can you imagine trying to tell a person they are wrong who has a strong sense of righteousness?

But by far my biggest challenge was something that I have struggled with nearly all of my life: My need to want the approval of everyone. It simply isn’t possible to lead and obtain everyone’s approval.

THE REFINING OF A LEADER

There were significant things that happened in my journey to be a better leader that refined my skills. My mentor, Phil, died and that forced me to think things through on my own.

I witnessed a number of mishandled employee disciplinary matters. After each incident I would examine each one and determine what I could have done better.

At one point the elected district attorney called me to his office to give me a new management assignment. He told me he was giving me a new challenge. He also informed me that I was going to work for the man I fought with the most. I was stunned. I couldn't imagine this was going to work out well. But a year later I was grateful for the opportunity. I learned a lot from this manager and I think I brought out the compassionate side of his leadership style.

I learned to supervise myself. I realized I could not expect the people who worked for me to have a strong work ethic if my own conduct did not live up to my standards.

I learned to have a little more humility. I made mistakes and when I did, I swallowed my pride and apologized immediately.

There were things that I learned outside of my management assignment. One day I received a call from my daughter's school. She was a senior in high school and was two weeks away from graduating. The principal and her journalism teacher wanted to speak with us. My daughter had written an article for the school newspaper criticizing the journalism teacher for censoring the students' articles.

My daughter had slipped this unapproved article into the newspaper. The principal was furious and at the insistence of the teacher they wanted to lower her final grade from an "A" to a "C," and they wanted to bar her from the commencement ceremony. We thought the punishment was excessive. We had a lengthy and spirited discussion with the principal and the teacher. We reasoned with the principal and she agreed not to bar our daughter from the commencement ceremony but she wouldn't budge on the grade. As the discussion was winding down the teacher folded her arms peered over her glasses and snidely said to me, "You know I could have successfully sued you guys for libel for the things she wrote about me." Without thinking, I quickly responded, "Not if it's true." The argument over the punishment started all over again with that statement and we were in the principal's office for another hour.

As we walked out to our car my husband turned to me and said in disgust, "You always have to have the last word. We were winning until you threw in your 'Not if it's true' comment." He was right. I was so busy trying to prove I was

12 Leadership Lessons Learned

After a 13-year journey to become a better leader here are 12 Leadership Lessons that I have learned:

1. Talk less, listen more.
2. Don't get caught up in your own "hype."
3. Admit you made a mistake.
4. Surround yourself with people who will tell you the truth.
5. Focus more on nurturing the 90 percent who do the work and less on the problems.
6. Treat people how you would want to be treated if you screwed up.
7. People self-destruct. You do not need to help them.
8. Correct in private, praise in public.
9. Never stop improving or learning how to be a better leader.
10. Don't write it, say it, or do it unless you don't mind seeing it in the newspaper.
11. Don't let your ego get in the way of changing an ill-advised decision.
12. Learn when to deal with a problem immediately and when to wait.

right, I lost sight of our goal. My daughter did participate in the commencement ceremony. But it was I who learned a valuable lesson that I would later use in my leadership role: *You can have the final decision without having the last word.*

The most significant thing I did to improve my leadership ability was to take in leadership classes. During my first class a light went on: "Success" depended on my ability and willingness to change those things innate in my personality that are contrary to the characteristics of a good leader.

I began to devour leadership books by John C. Maxwell

and Patrick Leccioni. They opened my mind to concepts that were foreign to me.

I changed, and the change in me produced a change in my effectiveness in influencing others. I changed my response to people. I grasped an understanding of what the role of a leader meant in the prosecutors office. I started preparing myself regularly to lead a group of highly educated and trained individuals to act as a team to successfully carry out the mission of the office, which was ultimately to seek justice.

I started accepting the blame when things went wrong and giving credit to my team when things went right. I started listening to the people who worked for me. I started watching other leaders in the office and figuring out what worked and what didn't work. I began to really understand what leaders were supposed to do:

- Leaders set and communicate the vision of the office and persuade others to buy into it.

- Leaders evaluate the performance of others and, therefore, you had better be a good role model.
- Leaders are responsible for making sure all of the work gets done.
- Leaders are the face of the office to the outside world.
- Leaders empower the “wrong” people as well as the “right” people so you had better choose the right people.
- Leaders facilitate problem-solving.

Remember, *“Everything Rises and Falls on Leadership.”*

— John C. Maxwell

The hard-working members of our offices deserve the best leaders. In our business, having grounded, prepared, committed, knowledgeable, and inspirational leaders with vision is the only way to ensure that we will achieve our mission of justice.

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