

Managing the self-limiting lawyer

New perspectives on professional development

Perfectionist lawyers who crave unblemished success and endless positive reinforcement are likely never to reach their full potential and are at serious risk of burnout and loss. Law firm and law department leaders owe these lawyers and their organizations solutions to their self-limiting behavior.

Productivity is on the minds of legal leaders and managers these days, whether they reside in-house, are law firm captains, or serve as practice group leaders charged with getting optimal output from the troops. Firms and legal departments are going to extraordinary lengths to maximize lawyer efficiency, including implementing Legal Project Management, shelling out for the latest software tools, or retooling leverage ratios and client service teams.

But there remains a largely overlooked source of inefficiency — overlooked primarily because it falls into the “soft” realm of human psychology and motivation, a domain that is anathema to most lawyers. It’s created by lawyers who have enormous potential and evident expertise, but whose self-limiting attitudes lead to persistent achievement deficits.

By Douglas B. Richardson, JD, MA, CMC





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Lawyers are widely regarded as hyper-achievers. But ironically, the traits and characteristics that lead certain people to select a legal career also predispose them to anxiety, self-doubt, perfectionism, feelings of inadequacy, and fears that they are impostors on the verge of being found out and publicly humiliated.

These self-limiting perspectives compromise their personal satisfaction and threaten their careers. From their employers' point of view, these hobbled lawyers represent an underperforming asset and a management challenge that cannot be ignored, as it often was in decades past.

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productivity. Given the costs of hiring, developing, and compensating legal talent, it is therefore worthwhile for managers and leaders to dig down and figure out what's really going on here.

HEART OF THE PROBLEM: THE "MASTERY PROFILE"

Most lawyers come wired with what we could call a "Mastery Profile." Their fundamental motivational drive is a desire — or is it a need? — to display personal mastery over a variety of challenges. They tend to be "challenge junkies" who define their self-image and their self-esteem largely in terms of individual achievement.

This Mastery Profile's performance-driven mindset has some clear and notable upsides. It makes for ambitious, achievement-oriented lawyers who thrive on variety, respond well to new challenges, work well independently, are highly responsible, and get a lot of stuff done.

THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

What's so self-limiting about that? Well, many "mastery profile" lawyers also tend to be perfectionists, which can make them prone to burnout and people-pleasing behavior as they strive to get as much positive feedback as possible. "Challenge junkies" require the reinforcement of a constant stream of success experiences. Not only that,

they feel that they're only as good as their most recent achievement, and they worry that a single failure will cancel out all the "life credit" they've built up through their prior accomplishments.

In the long run, challenge junkies can run out of stamina or become disengaged because they receive neither adequate internal nourishment nor constant applause from their external judges and juries. Law firm and legal department leaders often are baffled by these "flame-out" cases — lawyers who initially show great promise, but who struggle instead of maturing and who eventually succumb, if we may borrow a phrase from the medical profession, to a "failure to thrive."

These lawyers may leave, resign themselves to dead-end roles, or force their organizations to "make them available to the marketplace." In each case, to the regret of those who have high hopes for them, they end up costing the organization more than they deliver.

HIGH POTENTIAL ... OR DESTINED TO FALL SHORT?

Back in 2008, renowned executive coach Karol Wasylyshyn, Ph.D., identified several distinct mindsets in a sample of more than 300 executives, managers and lawyers she had coached since 1982. She first described what she calls "Unusual" executives: fully-realized achievers who seem naturally gifted as leaders, highly self-actualized, and hitting on all cylinders. Career-wise, most of these people "made it." In her sample, nearly 75% of this group had advanced in their careers, while the remaining quarter were in a "temporary plateau, soon to receive increased responsibility."

Wasylyshyn also identified a less happy group, which she labeled the "Unrequited." This group's members were no less talented than those in the Unusual category. "However," she says, "despite their successes and indications of further potential, they diminished their accomplishments, questioned their capabilities, were preoccupied with hyper-vigilant concerns about the future, obsessed about less than perfect performance, and remained locked in self-limiting thoughts."

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that they were overburdened by their own feelings of frustration, disappointment and discontentment. When they felt scrutinized or unfairly treated, especially relative to peers, they often regressed to petulant behavior or otherwise overreacted so much that questions were raised about their maturity as leaders.”

Predictably, these self-limiting attitudes and resulting behaviors damaged the careers of this group. “Fifty percent of them were in a longstanding plateau and the remaining 50% had been fired,” Wasylyshyn says. Their happiness also suffered: “People in this category were too self-absorbed and fundamentally dissatisfied to appreciate the world around them. Expressions of gratitude, hope or humor were not a consistent part of their behavioral repertoires.”

THE MINDSET MODEL

In *Mindset, the New Psychology of Success* (Ballantine, 2008), Carol Dweck, Ph.D., distinguished “fixed mindsets” from “growth mindsets.” The former believe their abilities — and therefore their prospects — are carved in stone and cannot be enhanced. The latter believe that “the hand you’re dealt is just the starting point for development,” and that “your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts.”



Fixed mindset lawyers tend to express a strong need for things to be under control. They tend to be risk-averse and alarmed by change, looking for snares or quicksand behind every bush, because they fear that the one fact or factor they don’t anticipate may be the one that produces catastrophe.

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Therefore, when the time comes to implement major changes or explore new directions, it’s often hard to get fixed-mindset lawyers to buy in. They prefer the devil they know to the devil they don’t, and so may appear inflexible, unimaginative and resistant to change. This is a particularly undesirable trait at a time when the whole legal profession is morphing in new directions and unseen forces appear to be rewriting the rules of success.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEGAL LEADERS

While legal leaders certainly can recognize the symptoms of self-limiting attitudes, it is neither appropriate nor effective for them to attempt to address another lawyer’s internal mental functions. Leaders and managers will not realign the thinking of a perfectionistic or self-defeating lawyer by saying, “You shouldn’t feel that way,” or “You got great performance reviews. Why aren’t you satisfied?”

Instead, legal leaders and managers should provide rational and objective feedback on the quality of their followers’ behaviors — their performance. That’s a major part of their job. Playing shrink, even if one’s intentions are compassionate and laudable, is risky business. However, identifying true high-potential talents and distinguishing them from “promising lawyers who seem to be carrying some baggage” is an important part of any leader’s role, as is making advancement opportunities available to those who can best take advantage of them.

This is not to suggest that firms should turn an unsympathetic or blind eye to anyone who seems excessively anxious, pessimistic or perfectionistic, particularly among younger lawyers prone to extreme performance anxiety. Many lawyers do mature, achieve their potential, and consolidate their accomplishments into a solid sense of self-confidence. Personalized support, from whatever source, can make a big difference.

A POUND OF CURE

Put simply, the best cure for self-limiting on-the-job lawyer attitudes and behaviors is good feedback, preferably from a variety of sources. The messages lawyers get from their firm or department should reflect an accurate and objective perception of their strengths, potential, developmental needs and outright liabilities. That is one of the cardinal virtues of competency-based performance evaluation, a performance measurement approach that keys career prospects to progression through a series of objectively defined performance criteria.

Similarly, coaching opportunities can be very beneficial, as long as the coach appreciates the crucial distinction between behavior-modification/skill-building issues and prying into underlying psychological adjustment issues.

Coaches should not be expected to engage in psychotherapy or try to help cure dysfunctions stemming from deep-rooted psychological causes. But they can play an instrumental role in helping self-limiting lawyers to develop more accurate self-perception and better reality-testing capability.

By serving as a supportive yet objective sounding board, coaches can help lawyers learn to “reframe” their attitudes and assumptions, and thereby to adjust their behaviors. Skilled coaches can help their clients to plan, pre-brief and debrief high-stakes tasks and interactions, to better understand and navigate political waters the lawyer struggles to understand, and to generally enhance the lawyer’s “emotional intelligence.” They can push back at negativity in a constructive manner, spot examples of denial and self-defeating assumptions, and provide instruction about developing more professional or appropriate behaviors.

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CAN LAWYERS FIX THEIR OWN SELF-LIMITING ATTITUDES?

With practice, lawyers (like anyone else) can learn to examine and reframe their internal assumptions and beliefs, first by recognizing recurring patterns of unproductive thought and then by learning to challenge those patterns objectively and systematically. This does not have to be done with a psychologist or therapist using cognitive therapy; it can be developed as a self-help skill.

The responsibilities of good legal managers therefore include helping self-limiters to help themselves by providing the objective information on which accurate reality-testing is predicated.

For many managers, however, providing candid feedback is very difficult. They often prefer to avoid confrontation and withdraw from providing potentially painful feedback, rather than lay the truth on the line. Such avoidance represents an abdication of their leadership or management

responsibilities. It is itself a self-limiting behavior, one that diminishes their effectiveness as a manager, at a cost to those to whom they owe the duty of candid and honest feedback.

At all levels and in all settings, self-limiting behaviors cannot be simply written off as an inevitable byproduct of human nature or as an unavoidable cost of doing business. The prescription for the self-limiting lawyer disease is active intervention; the remedy is candid, constant and supportive feedback. •



Legal leadership and communications

Over 30 years of coaching and consulting, **Doug Richardson** has helped hundreds of lawyers develop into skilled organizational leaders, powerful collaborators and uncommonly convincing communicators. Doug’s experience as a trial lawyer and nationally-recognized architect of innovative leadership programs lends a practical perspective to translating effective communication into superior team performance.

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