

“A manager with good leadership skills can make any workplace an energizing and exciting place to be.”

BE A CLASSROOM LEADER

BY JAMES B. LEVY

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I love to teach. When I first started, though, I did not know much about it. Like most people who leave practice to teach at a law school, I had no formal training for my new career. So, to better prepare myself for the classroom, I spent a lot of time reading texts on effective teaching. The more I read, the more I recognized the similarity between teaching and other professions involving good management skills. Like the CEO of any successful business, or a winning sports coach, a teacher's success depends in large part on his or her ability to inspire, motivate, and manage others. In short, a successful teacher needs to be a classroom leader.

Consider your own work experiences and how much impact the boss' leadership skills had on your performance, productivity, and morale. A manager with good leadership skills can make any workplace an energizing and exciting place to be. When you work for the right person, it's fun to come to the office. On the other hand, a manager with poor leadership skills can demoralize and undermine the most talented, hardworking, and motivated employees such that coming to work becomes a miserable experience. Think about the kind of manager you would like to work for. Then think about the kind of classroom manager you would like to be for your students. Like any other group undertaking, a teacher's leadership skills can make or break the quality of the experience from the students' standpoint.

Fortunately, teachers do not have to reinvent the wheel when it comes to learning effective leadership skills because there already exists an abundance of material discussing the subject in other contexts. Some traits of effective leaders—like charisma—are dependent on complex interpersonal dynamics and tend to be situational and, therefore, difficult to replicate on demand.¹

¹ See Nancy C. Roberts & Raymond T. Bradley, "Limits of Charisma," in *Concepts of Leadership* 83, 101–02 (Jeffrey A. Sonnenfeld ed., 1995).

On the other hand, some traits shared by all successful leaders can be easily learned and implemented by any legal writing teacher interested in becoming a better classroom manager. Discussed below are some of the most important.

First and foremost, good leaders have the ability to motivate others. While numerous theories of human motivation exist,² central to all of them is the importance of establishing a supportive atmosphere that encourages everyone to do his or her best work. Whether in the workplace or the classroom, performance depends on motivated individuals interacting with a supportive environment. An environment that is unsupportive—or worse—frustrates performance and undermines motivation. One scholar on managerial effectiveness suggests that the relationship between individual performance and the surrounding environment is expressed by the following formula:

$$\text{Performance} = \text{Ability} \times \text{Support} \times \text{Effort}^3$$

Think about how much it means to have a boss who believes in you, who offers an occasional word of support or pats you on the back for a job well done. Contrast that with the boss who spends most of his or her time evaluating, criticizing, and judging. Whom would you rather work for? What kind of teacher do you think your students want to learn from?

Related to this, motivational theory recognizes that people are more likely to do their best work when they feel confident in their abilities.⁴ Thus, a good leader knows the importance of instilling

² See Martin E. Ford, *Motivating Humans: Goals, Emotions, and Personal Agency Beliefs* 173–200 (1992) (chart summarizing 32 theories of motivation).

³ See *id.* at 71 (citing J.R. Schermerhorn Jr., *Team Development for High Performance Management*, 40 *Training and Dev. J.* 38–43 (1986)); see also James J. Cribbin, *Leadership—Strategies for Organizational Effectiveness* 18 (1981) (referring to study that found managers who were warm, friendly, and supportive of employees' efforts tended to create environment of high productivity and job satisfaction).

⁴ See John P. Kotter, "What Leaders Really Do" in *Concepts of Leadership*, *supra* note 1, at 107 (leaders are successful because they satisfy "basic human needs for achievement, a sense of belonging, recognition, self-esteem, a feeling of control over one's life, and the ability to live up to one's ideals."); Dale E. Schunk, "Self-Efficacy and Education" in *Self-Efficacy, Adaptation, and Adjustment: Theory, Research, and Application* 291 (James E. Maddux ed., 1995).

self-confidence in everyone's ability to accomplish the task at hand. That helps explain a study that found that teachers who set high standards against an atmosphere of encouragement and warmth tend to be the most effective at helping students to learn.⁵ In a very real way, therefore, our attitudes about our students' abilities tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. If we believe they will do good work, then we create a classroom atmosphere that helps turn that into a reality. Conversely, if we expect our students to fail, then we help to bring about that result as well. In the words of German philosopher Goethe: "If I accept you as you are, I will make you worse; however, if I treat you as though you are what you are capable of becoming, I help you become that."

It follows, therefore, that leadership depends on establishing a good working relationship with the group being led. Nothing helps motivation, productivity, and morale more than a boss who truly likes and cares about his or her employees. As one commentator noted:

Production and morale can be increased when the workers feel that management is interested in them as individuals. "If the principle is sound for business . . . is it not reasonable to assume that student morale and academic output might increase if students felt their professors were interested in them as individuals?"⁶

Consequently, students will tend to do their best when they see that the teacher truly cares about them. Some simple advice from management consultants that we can easily adapt to the legal writing classroom is to get to know the names of our students, and a little something about each of them, as quickly as possible.⁷ Taking an interest in our students helps them feel more connected to the teacher and, as a result, more interested in what is being taught. In fact, a

recent study completed by Harvard University found that a key to happiness and success among college students was their ability to establish a good relationship with at least one faculty member during their time at school.⁸

Showing students that you care about them includes praising them for a job well done. All of us want to feel worthwhile and appreciated for the work we do. Good classroom leadership, therefore, depends upon the appropriate use of praise to provide feedback, support, and encouragement. "One of the most important things a teacher can do is praise. . . . Students may learn what they should not do by making mistakes; they learn what to do by the rewards of success."⁹ However, it is important that praise be metered out with integrity since false praise is "just as likely to undermine motivation" if it is seen as patronizing or unjustified or is used as a strategy for controlling behavior.¹⁰

Consequently, good leadership also depends on trust. Members of a group are more likely to do their best when they believe the leader is a person of integrity. Students, in particular, are hypersensitive to any perceived lack of fairness on the part of the teacher. Therefore, be especially careful not to show any favoritism in class or during your outside interactions with the students. Good leadership principles suggest that a teacher who establishes a level playing field where all students feel they have a fair chance at success bolsters motivation to learn.

Credibility is also an important leadership quality.¹¹ Never try to bluff your way through material you are not sure about or fake an answer to a question you do not know. Instead, admit your lack of knowledge and agree to look up the information and get back to the students next time. Likewise, if you misstate something in class, admit it. Students are very forgiving of those teachers they believe are engaging them from a position of honesty and trust. Conversely, any

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⁵ See Don Hamachek, *Psychology in Teaching, Learning, and Growth* 401–02 (4th ed., 1990).

⁶ See Jon G. Penner, *Why Many College Teachers Cannot Lecture—How to Avoid Communication Breakdown in the Classroom* 58–59 (1984) (citing Dan B. Wolf, *Can Education Learn from Business?* 13 *Improving College & U. Teaching* 110–11 (1965)).

⁷ See Warren Blank, *The 9 Natural Laws of Leadership* 190 (1995).

⁸ Kate Zernike, *The Harvard Guide to Happiness—A 10-Year Study Reveals How to Have a Better College Experience*, N.Y. Times, April 18, 2001 (Education Life Supplement), at 18.

⁹ Penner, *supra* note 5, at 174 (citing Donald A. Bligh, *What's the Use of Lectures?* 58 (1971)).

¹⁰ Ford, *supra* note 2, at 204.

¹¹ See Blank, *supra* note 7, at 206.

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defensiveness on the part of the teacher for mistakes made during class tends to undermine that trust and, therefore, negatively impacts your ability to lead them.¹²

As the reader has probably gathered by now, leadership is born out of mutual respect between the leader and the group.¹³ Members of a group will work hard for someone when they believe he or she has the same respect, devotion, and commitment to them. It is not enough to say that you respect the students; you have to demonstrate that respect every day in the classroom. Admittedly, it is sometimes difficult for legal writing teachers to feel that way since we often bear the brunt of student frustration and disappointment over their academic performance. Good leaders, however, never take that kind of criticism personally. Instead, good leaders try to understand the reasons behind the frustration in order to resolve it in a constructive way.

Good leaders, therefore, do not get embroiled in personal disputes. Management consultants warn against getting drawn into personality conflicts because they tend to undermine the leader's credibility and respect with the rest of the group.¹⁴ If a disagreement or dispute arises, do your best to see it from the other person's standpoint. Rather than take it as a personal affront, ask yourself what you can do to resolve the situation in a way that is positive for all parties. That does not mean you should ever tolerate bad student behavior; experts agree you should not.¹⁵ But good leaders know it is important to discourage only the bad behavior without discouraging or disparaging the student.

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¹² See Roberts, *supra* note 1, at 99 (discussing example of school commissioner who was unable to transfer her leadership success to new position because she became embroiled in personal disputes and, as a result, was perceived to be on the defensive).

¹³ See Blank *supra* note 7, at 12–13, 186–88 (leadership is the result of good personal relationships based on mutual trust and respect).

¹⁴ *Id.* at 186–87.

¹⁵ See Gerald Amada, *Coping with Misconduct in the College Classroom: A Practical Model* 43–44 (1999).