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10 Steps to Unlock Your Legal Leadership Potential

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The challenges of the past decade have been brutal for leaders. And the legal world hasn't escaped the turmoil, as accelerated digitalization, heightened public scrutiny and increased cost pressure take their toll on corporate legal departments. This new world order is sharpening the requirement for legal experts to become legal leaders; able to act as change agents, contribute to cultural change within their organization, and inspire and develop top talent.

Making the shift from legal expert to leader isn't easy; it takes in-depth work in terms of personality, motivation, and identity. In [Egon Zehnder's](#) experience, few lawyers even aspire to become leaders. Nevertheless, it's imperative for every legal department to unlock the leadership potential of team members to remain successful and relevant in this ever-changing and complex world.

Follow the ten tips below to unleash leadership potential and transform yourself and others into an inspirational legal leader.

1. Abandon the wrong way to identify leadership potential

First of all, how should you identify leadership potential in yourself and others? Egon Zehnder regularly encounters three approaches used to locate leadership capability:

- Equating current performance with potential;
- Equating previous experience with potential; and
- Relying on intuition to identify potential.

[Our research](#) proves that all three approaches are flawed. Firstly, few high performers show genuine leadership potential. Conversely, those with high potential might be entirely overlooked if they aren't ideally placed in their current role. Nor should you give undue weight to experience: you can't predict the future simply by looking at the past.

And relying solely on intuition gives free rein to unconscious biases, leading us to hire those who most resemble our younger selves and thereby ignore others.

2. Use a researched method to predict potential

So, now that we know the wrong way to define potential, what precisely is the right approach? Egon Zehnder has developed a scientifically-based model, based on [findings](#) from high-profile researchers, using empirical and experiential data gained over many years of experience and trialled in a large number of organizations. This analysis model assesses individuals according to four traits: **curiosity**, **insight**, **engagement**, and **determination**. These four traits accurately predict how an individual's specific competencies should develop in future.

3. Stay curious about yourself

Firstly, it's important to remain curious. Curiosity drives someone to proactively understand and learn via new ideas, experiences, and information. Change, experimentation, and feedback energize curious people. And self-curiosity is vital in the journey towards self-transformation.

Do you foster a culture of regular self-reflection and candid feedback?

4. Employ insight to understand the situation and see the simple way forward

Next use your insight. This is the energy someone gains from processing lots of information and using it to make sense of ambiguity, simplify complexity and break the status quo.

How often do you create simplicity out of complexity?

5. Engage with others to become an inspiration

Someone with high levels of engagement appeals to the hearts and minds of fellow employees thanks to their infectious enthusiasm, energy, and sense of purpose. They gain energy by authentically connecting with others and understanding them at a deeper level.

How often do you leave a meeting knowing that you have inspired others and that they are fully committed and excited about your proposed course of action?

6. Be determined to overcome your next challenge

Determination is the energy someone gains from facing a challenge, overcoming any obstacles and changing direction when needed.

How much do you enjoy being out of your comfort zone?

7. Become aware of your own inner potential

The assessment of potential based on these four dimensions serves as a basis to unlock leadership potential. Lawyers often don't identify themselves as leaders, but rather as content experts. However, they shouldn't limit themselves. Once legal leaders start to work on their own self-awareness, they soon recognize their strengths as a leader. In fact, self-awareness is one of the paramount qualities shared by any leader, anywhere. Before you can successfully lead others, you need to first master self-leadership, which requires developing a higher degree of self-awareness. No matter how many leadership tools, models, or skills we learn, we can't be truly effective as leaders if we're not aligned with ourselves. Without self-awareness, self-leadership is impossible.

Reflect on the following: do you often intend to delegate work but end up doing most of the work by yourself? Or maybe you want to learn from feedback but end up reacting defensively to critical remarks? If you answered any of these questions with "yes", you are falling prey to a "performance gap", namely the difference between what we know we should do but end up doing instead. To overcome such a performance gap, we need to increase our self-awareness and strengthen our ability to notice, question, and adapt our leadership style.

8. Learn to understand your inner world to start a voyage of self-discovery

Humans are made up various selves, some of which are stronger than others. As neuroscientist David Eagleman writes in his book "Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain" (Canongate Canons, 2011): "A person isn't a single entity of a single mind: a human is built of several parts, all of which compete to steer the ship of state. As a consequence, people are nuanced, complicated, contradictory."

As mentioned above, performance gaps arise when one part of our inner selves makes a plan, while another part refuses to stick to that plan. The solution is to explore the contradictory voices of your inner self, and negotiate with yourself, mediating a conversation among these differing parts until they are aligned around a plan.

9. Recognize which of four personality archetypes is most dominant

According to the well-researched model of [Erica Ariel Fox](#), a negotiation lecturer at Harvard Law School, and author of 'Winning from Within', there are four main components that make up your inner self. These are: The Dreamer, the Thinker, the Lover, and the Warrior. The Dreamer cares about creativity and future vision. The Thinker is invested in reason and analysis. The Lover is engaged with emotion and relationships. Meanwhile, the Warrior is determined to achieve results and protect what matters. Egon Zehnder calls this behavioral pattern the leader's Big Four Profile. Recognizing these tendencies in yourself is a vital form of self-awareness on the path to becoming a great leader, as explained in the next section.

10. Unite all four archetypes to become a balanced leader

Most of us rely on one or two of these archetypes. For example, as a lawyer you might focus on your Thinker characteristics to examine facts, apply logic and consider a legal issue from all angles, such as analyzing why court proceedings have hit unexpected challenges. Likewise, under pressure to deliver ever more billable hours and meet approaching deadlines, lawyers will constantly tap into their Warrior energy. But this leaves little time or room for Dreamer and Lover archetypes and their vital virtues, such as creativity and compassion.

A balanced legal leader will bring together all the virtues of their Big Four - at the right time and in the right magnitude. For example, the Dreamer can be of great value in devising a creative strategy for a complex litigation case. Or the Lover might come into play when you show compassion to a lawyer who wants to integrate work with parenting. If you spend all of your time within Warrior or Thinker mode, you might be able to take bold actions and hedge yourself against all potential risks but conversely, you might find yourself alone, without any clear direction or vision, as your Lover and Dreamer weren't able to do their job. Self-mastery – the key to becoming an agent of change and culture transformation begins with [balancing out your profile](#).

Conclusion

By becoming self-aware of your inner potential, reflecting on your inner self, and uniting different personality archetypes, you can start to unleash your leadership potential and make an effective transition from legal expert to legal leader.

Authors: [Simone Stebler](#), [Consultant](#), and Jill Ader, [Chairwoman](#), Egon Zehnder

Additional Resources

- [ACC Leadership Skills Collection](#)
- [Mark Roellig, “Career Path: Looking for Exceptional Leadership? Look for Exceptionally Engaged Teams”, ACC Docket, July-August 2019, pages 26-28](#)
- Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, Andrew Roscoe, Kentaro Aramaki, “Turning Potential into Success: The Missing Link in Leadership Development”, Harvard Business Review (November 2017)
- Francesca Gino and Bradley Staats: Why Organizations Don't Learn: Our Traditional Obsessions—Success, Taking Action, Fitting In, and Relying on Experts—Undermine Continuous Improvement. Harvard Business Review 93, no. 11 (November 2015)
- Claudio Fernández-Aráoz: 21st-century Talent Spotting: Why Potential Now Trumps Brains, Experience, and "competencies. Harvard Business Review 92, no. 6 (June 2014)

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