

PUBLICATION

Leadership: How Justice Ginsburg Inspires Us to Lead

Authors: Linda A. Klein, Timothy Lupinacci

October 08, 2020

Linda Klein, Baker Donelson Senior Managing Shareholder and Past President of the American Bar Association

Justice Ginsburg was a brilliant woman who inspired a generation. What was it about a petit older woman that excited us all to follow her lead?

The women lawyers she inspired saw her as a role model. She was someone who juggled a successful personal life and career. She blazed a trail through discrimination so others could have a smoother path. With her encouragement, women lawyers knew they had to continue her work to assure the next generation would benefit from an equal chance at success.

Lawyers were inspired by her clear writing. Her brief writing and her opinions were meticulously drafted. She meant what she said, and she said what she meant. Whether you agreed with her or not, you understood what she was trying to tell you.

Professionals of all types of training were inspired by her civility and courteous demeanor. No matter how rude her opponent was, she never stooped down to that level. She used her brain and her words, oral and written, to make her point without insults or personal attacks.

World leaders were inspired by her patience as she traveled the globe, speaking and meeting with lawyers and other leaders who were trying to bring human rights to their countries. She saw equality as coming from the opportunity for an education, which, sadly, is still denied to women and girls in many places.

Young people were inspired by what she stood for, like the 20-something woman who held up a sign at the 2017 Women's March that read, "In case of emergency, donate all organs to Justice Ginsburg."

We all were inspired by her kindness. An eight-year-old girl dressed up as Justice Ginsburg for Superheroes Day at school. She received a handwritten note from the Justice.

As a leader she was the whole package. Her indefatigable work ethic allowed her to do all of this. Thankfully she lived to enjoy the adoration she earned and may have been surprised by how it grew following her death. She inspired us through quiet leadership. May her memory continue to inspire us and generations to come.

Tim Lupinacci, Baker Donelson Chairman and CEO

In reflecting on the many leadership traits of Ruth Bader Ginsberg that I admire, there are three that have most inspired and informed my own journey: (i) focus; (ii) optimism; and (iii) finding common ground. The first characteristic from Ginsberg's life that I admire is her intense focus on achieving her goals and priorities. Ginsberg noted once that "real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time." The persistence required to make lasting change and leave a legacy comes only with resolute focus on the direction you are heading so that when the obstacles arise, you will persist. Her life is a testament that resolute focus is required

to achieve meaningful and lasting change. She had to persevere against many odds but left a legacy of systemic change and progress because of her focus on achieving key priorities. Ginsberg focused on using her talents, insights and skills for the legal protection and advancement of the rights of women. True leadership involves resolute focus on a limited number of important priorities and then persisting to achieve them regardless of the opposition.

The second remarkable leadership quality of Ginsberg was her optimism. She truly believed that change was possible and would occur no matter how long or how challenging the road would be to achieve it. She appeared to approach every day with positivity and optimism noting that "so often in life, things that you regard as an impediment turn out to be great, good fortune." Despite multiple setbacks, she pressed forward believing she would prevail in the end. Her calm demeanor and positive outlook enabled her to lead forward even when she found herself in the minority. Despite facing the realities of discrimination and inequality in this country on a near-daily basis, Ginsburg never lost her sense of optimism and perseverance.

Finally, Ginsberg worked hard to find common ground with those she disagreed. She challenges us to not be "distracted by emotions like anger, envy, resentment. These just zap energy and waste time." She held very strong views and passionately advocated for them, however, she prized professionalism and collegiality. There are multiple examples through her journey of being a consensus-builder, including her friendship with Justice Antonin Scalia. Looking to shared interests, she always remained cordial, while firm, in her opinions. As a leader, I have found it critical to work hard to understand the other person's views, their journey to this point, and ultimately where they are coming from. This enables me to then work to find areas of agreement and build collaborative progress in advancement. Ginsberg was a bridge builder so she could move the conversation or effort forward, while always keeping her ultimate destination in view.

I would be remiss if not also pointing out one additional leadership trait that I appreciated about Ginsberg – her love of knowledge and reading. She once said that "reading is the key that opens doors to many good things in life. Reading shaped my dreams, and more reading helped me make my dreams come true." I could not agree more.