

PUBLICATION

A Tale of Two Leaders: What Leadership Has Taught Me

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Showcasing how leaders come in various shapes and sizes is the common thread throughout this issue. We interviewed two Baker Donelson women leaders – Martha Boyd, chair of the Firm's Labor & Employment Group, and Jennifer Dunlap, vice-chair for the Firm's Labor & Employment Group – to see how they approach leadership, empower others, and what they have learned about themselves within their leadership roles.

1. What is your leadership style?

Martha Boyd: I try to empower people to achieve rather than telling them what or how to do their job. Our group at the Firm has supremely talented attorneys – and I see it as my job to help remove obstacles so they can achieve their goals. I believe that helping them find resources and answers, giving them opportunities to exercise autonomy and excel, and trusting them to serve our clients with the utmost care is my highest and best use as a leader.

Jennifer Dunlap: I would say a combination of democratic and coaching leadership styles. I like to build consensus when I can; however, it's important to me in my current leadership role to support team members as individuals.

2. What do you think makes an effective leader?

MB: I received much of my leadership training as an Army officer and the guiding principle I learned there applies equally here – care about your people. In the Army that meant caring for my soldiers, their families, their safety, and their competence. At Baker Donelson, that means helping communicate to my group the expectations of the Firm and identify opportunities where they can meet those expectations.

JD: An effective leader carefully considers the opinions of the group but is also not afraid to make tough decisions when necessary. An effective leader also understands what motivates each person on their team and helps them get to the next level.

3. How do you motivate people?

MB: I believe everybody wants to be part of a strong team – they want to contribute and see those contributions deliver results for clients. I think encouraging collaboration among group members to work on a case, a presentation, or an article, is a great way to motivate them because they forge new relationships and feel even more a part of the team.

JD: I make sure they clearly understand the goal and where we want to go, and then I help them plan out a specific path to get us there.

4. How do you get buy-in?

MB: To get buy-in, you must clearly explain the "why." Attorneys are often inquisitive (understatement) and can question a lot of things. In these situations, I try to explain the decision or policy change as it relates to the "bigger picture" for the Firm, and particularly how a decision impacts the attorneys in my group specifically.

JD: I think an effective way to get buy-in is by demonstrating how the goal/mission/vision not only benefits the group as a whole but also each individual within the group.

5. How do you deal with conflict?

MB: If I'm trying to foster compromise, I try to understand what is motivating the other person and look for common ground in our positions. Very often, I find that our positions are a lot closer together than it seems, and we can settle on certain aspects from each side.

JD: By taking a step back, listening, and then framing the issue separately from the individual if possible.

6. Do you think your leadership style has changed over the years?

MB: Definitely. When I was in the Army, my leadership style was much more paternalistic. I had to make sure soldiers were trained to do their jobs in a wartime scenario, which meant being mentally and physically fit, where issues on the Homefront were taken care of so they could focus on their jobs. Attorneys are obviously a different audience and a law firm operates with much more individual autonomy and less direct supervision. Now, my leadership style is much less top-down and more collaborative, offering tools and suggestions to help our attorneys achieve their professional goals.

JD: I have become more confident in making decisions.

7. What is one challenge you faced as a leader that tested you?

MB: When I was deployed to Iraq as an Army Reservist in 2004, I was appointed to serve as the to the Iraqi Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs as part of the Coalition Provisional Authority effort to restore Iraq to a functioning government. I had to lead a group of civilian advisors from the U.S. and Romania, as well as Iraqi interpreters and cultural advisors, and some American military members. We all had different perspectives on how to deal with our Iraqi counterparts and sometimes those perspectives resulted in heated and emotional disagreements. While I would generally strive for consensus, there were times when I had to make difficult decisions that I knew would be unpopular with certain people on the team. Leaving Iraq in 2004 with unfinished work was frustrating, but I hoped that I was leaving a good example of leadership and selfless service for our Iraqi counterparts to emulate.

JD: There are times when imposter syndrome can prevent me from taking action.

8. What have you learned about yourself from being in leadership?

MB: I've learned that while I love being a leader, I also love the teamwork aspect of leadership; I cannot do this job alone. Keeping up with what our very busy group members are doing requires help from many other people throughout the Firm. They help keep me up to speed on stories of hard-fought victories that need to be celebrated; newly-landed clients that have required an attorney's devoted attention; or personal challenges that took an attorney's focus off of work for a period of time.

JD: I really enjoy being in service to others.

9. Who is someone you admire as a leader? What kind of a leader inspires you?

MB: I am inspired by leaders who can communicate a clear sense of purpose and help their team members embrace and find meaning in that purpose. Baker Donelson's approach to client service through BakerVision 28 (the Firm's strategic plan) is a unifying vision where our Firm can rally around a common goal of ensuring that we provide our clients with unparalleled representation.

JD: I admire Steve Griffith, chair of the Firm's Advocacy Department . He is the type of leader who challenges you to achieve goals which may seem impossible, but I have personally seen this method lead to impressive results. Leaders who challenge me to get outside of my comfort zone inspire me.

10. What advice do you have for those who want to move into a leadership role?

MB: Speak up - present a new idea, inform leaders on hot/trending topics, new approaches, or volunteer to take the lead on a specific project. These types of demonstrations of commitment to the growth of the Firm/company will get you noticed.

JD: Increase your visibility by interacting with a variety of people on a regular basis. Try and be as helpful as you can and be vocal about being interested in taking on a leadership role.