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From Fear to Trust: How Law Firms Can Break the Cycle of Toxic Leadership

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In the high-pressure environment of law firms, many of us have either witnessed or heard stories of partners losing their temper—berating junior lawyers in front of peers, slamming doors, or even throwing objects in frustration. These incidents often leave associates feeling shocked, demoralized, and helpless. The prevailing sentiment becomes, “What can you do?” Addressing such behavior directly seems risky, especially when the partner in question is a significant rainmaker. Consequently, the cycle continues, and the firm's culture suffers. In many of these situations, partners may have their behavior acknowledged or addressed informally by the executive committee or HR, but they are rarely held accountable. Often, they receive little to no direct feedback that their conduct is inappropriate, which contributes to the behavior continuing unchecked.

But what if there is a solution? What if, instead of accepting this as the norm, firms could address the root causes of such behavior and foster a more supportive and productive environment?

What Is Fear-Based Leadership?

Fear-based leadership is characterized by dominance, control, and the threat of consequences. Common behaviors include:

- **Public Shaming or Belittling:** Undermining individuals in front of peers and others.
- **Withholding Information:** Maintaining control by limiting access to knowledge.
- **Micromanaging or Punitive Oversight:** Undermining autonomy through excessive control and imposing disproportionate consequences for mistakes.
- **Mood-Driven Decision-Making:** Allowing personal emotions to dictate professional decisions.

These types of behaviors can meet the criteria for workplace bullying. According to the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), more than 30% of American adults report experiencing bullying on the job.

How Does Fear-Based Leadership Impact the Workplace?

These behaviors create an environment where employees are constantly on edge—focus frays, confidence erodes, and wellbeing suffers.

More specifically, the personal toll on individuals, who are on the receiving end of fear-based leadership, often manifests as follows:

- **Chronic Stress and Burnout:** Fear triggers constant fight-or-flight responses, sapping energy and wellbeing.
- **Loss of Psychological Safety:** Employees suppress ideas, questions, and feedback, which stifles growth and innovation.
- **Imposter Syndrome and Low Self-Worth:** Constant criticism without developmental support damages confidence, which can result in talented people exiting the organization and/or the profession altogether.
- **Physical Health Implications:** Elevated blood pressure, insomnia, fatigue, and other stress-related health issues, which undermines the physical health and wellbeing of the individual.

In addition, the organizational impact of fear-based leadership should not be underestimated. This type of leadership often results in:

- **Culture of Silence:** Employees avoid raising concerns or surfacing problems, fearing retaliation.
- **High Turnover and Low Engagement:** Fear leads to disengagement and prompts valuable talent to leave.
- **Stagnant Innovation:** A fearful environment inhibits risk-taking and creativity.
- **Diminished Trust in Leadership:** Mistrust spreads beyond the individual leader, weakening the entire leadership pipeline.
- **Reputation Risk:** Word spreads—affecting recruitment and client trust.

All of this means that not only do organizations and individuals not thrive under fear-based leadership, over time, neither the organization nor the individual can sustain the unchecked consequences of this leadership style.

Understanding the Fear Behind the Behavior

Interestingly, some fear-based leaders are unaware that they lead through fear. In their minds, they are holding people accountable or maintaining high standards and either aren't aware of the negative impact on others or feel that the character it builds outweighs any negative impact. But often, these behaviors stem from the leader's unexamined fear—of failure, criticism, loss of control, or appearing vulnerable.

Drawing on over fifteen years of research, Tepper, Simon, and Park identified key drivers of toxic leadership behaviors in their 2017 article titled *Abusive Supervision*:

- **Identity Threat:** Leaders' own insecurities and fear of criticism can lead to defensive behaviors.
- **Self-Regulation Impairment:** Inability to manage emotions and self-regulate can result in lashing out, especially under stress.
- **Social Learning:** Exposure to fear-based leadership in past roles or organizational cultures can normalize abusive behaviors, as leaders model what they have observed or experienced.

These factors suggest that some leaders may not be aware of the fear they instill, as their actions are rooted in their own fears and learned behaviors.

The Cost of Silence

When other leadership stands silent and appears powerless or unwilling to address this behavior, they become silent enablers. The only choice those with less power have is to leave and disengage. In the meantime, they suffer, and their work suffers, creating a contagion effect all around them.

Research indicates that leaders with low self-awareness often exhibit toxic behaviors, such as micromanagement and dishonesty, leading to negative outcomes like employee disengagement and decreased performance.

According to a [National Institutes of Health study](#) on workplace bullying in healthcare, incivility and bullying not only harm employees' health but may also carry significant economic costs for employers. While identifying the problem is relatively straightforward, designing and implementing effective interventions is far more complex. However, such efforts—though challenging—have the potential to deliver meaningful benefits for both employees and organizations alike.

Stuck Between a Bully and the Bottom Line? Avoid the Zero-Sum Game by Cultivating Emotional Intelligence

Traditional interventions typically don't work—few, if any, want to challenge the rainmaker. Policies exist, but they often come off as hollow or ineffective. Fear-based leaders rarely face external correction because their authority often shields them from honest feedback. As a result, meaningful change can't be imposed—it must be driven by the leader's own willingness to reflect, grow, and shift their mindset.

Leaders who cultivate emotional intelligence—particularly empathy, self-awareness, and transparency—build trust, resilience, and innovation within their teams. They create environments where feedback is welcomed, mistakes are learning opportunities, and people feel seen rather than surveilled.

This is where executive coaching can be a powerful tool and process. A meta-analysis found that executive coaching significantly impacts behavioral outcomes, particularly in enhancing self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Coaching provides a safe space for leaders to explore and address their underlying fears, leading to sustainable behavioral changes.

David once worked with a senior leader who was a highly respected subject matter expert but was perceived by their team as intimidating and fear-inducing. When David asked how the leader believed they were viewed by their team, the leader confidently responded, "They think very highly of me."

To build self-awareness, David introduced a simple but revealing exercise. He asked the leader to write down three words or phrases they would use to describe themselves. Then he encouraged the leader to ask multiple team members to do the same—write down three words or short phrases that described the leader and leave them anonymously on the leader's chair.

When the responses came in, they painted a very different picture. Words like *vindictive*, *micromanager*, *mean*, and *untrustworthy* surfaced repeatedly. The leader was stunned. After sitting with the feedback for a few moments, they turned to David and said, *"I don't want to be that person."*

That moment marked the beginning of a transformative journey. Over the following year, the leader committed to developing greater emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-awareness. In time, their team experienced a fundamentally different leader—one who listened, empowered, and inspired.

The key takeaway? Emotional intelligence is neither innate nor set in stone. With intention, feedback, and dedicated effort, anyone can build these skills. It does, however, require self-awareness and a willingness to act on that awareness.

A recent Bloomberg article, [*Empaths at the Gate*](#), highlighted how private equity giant Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR)—not known for fostering a culture of psychological safety—uncovered a surprising truth: Companies led by high-empathy leaders significantly outperformed those led by low-empathy ones. Yet even KKR executive Pete Stavros had to have a wake-up call about empathy—one that's now reshaping how the firm develops its leaders.

Why? Because empathy isn't about being "nice." It's about driving performance, accountability, and loyalty—especially in uncertain, high-stakes environments.

As Stanford psychologist Jamil Zaki explains, empathy enables leaders to:

- Deliver honest, effective feedback while preserving dignity;
- Pinpoint the real barriers to performance;
- Build trust that fuels collaboration and innovation; and
- Foster connection, increasing retention and discretionary effort.

Empathy isn't merely a soft skill—it's a strategic advantage.

And when the waters get rough, empathy isn't something to set aside. It's what helps you rally your team, build resilience, and row through the storm—together.

Conclusion

Fear-based leadership is unsustainable. While it may yield short-term compliance, it erodes trust, stifles innovation, and damages organizational culture over time. Recognizing that such leadership often stems from the leader's own fears and lack of self-awareness opens the door to transformation. Executive coaching emerges as a vital tool in this process, offering leaders a mirror to reflect on their behaviors and the impact they have on others.

In many law firms, confronting fear-based behavior directly—especially when exhibited by high-performing partners or rainmakers—is fraught with risk. The potential fallout from challenging these influential figures often leads to a culture of silence, where issues remain unaddressed, and the well-being of associates is compromised. It's a difficult calculus: the firm may feel it's more palatable to lose valuable associates than to confront an influential partner.

However, there's another way. If the partner is coachable and willing to engage in the process, executive coaching can serve as a powerful intervention. Coaching provides a confidential, judgment-free, and supportive environment where leaders can explore their behaviors, understand the underlying fears driving them, and develop healthier, more effective leadership styles. This inside-out approach fosters genuine change, benefiting not only the individual leader but also the broader organizational culture.

To foster a sustainable firm with a strong associate bench, firms must prioritize creating environments that encourage self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and open communication—qualities that are increasingly becoming non-negotiables for junior lawyers. By investing in leadership development and fostering a culture of trust and psychological safety, firms can move away from fear-based practices and towards a more empowering and effective leadership model.

When leaders confront their fears, they don't just change how they lead—they change the culture around them, creating space for others to thrive.

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