Law Practice Magazine The Leadership Issue

How to Avoid the Undermining Paradox of Pushing Too Hard

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Summary

- Increased self-awareness will help you to anticipate problems and productively achieve results.
- “Befriending your shadow” gives you the insight necessary to objectively strategize your leadership actions.
- The short-form leadership and culture assessment provides insight into you at your best and at your worst.

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It has been rough. You're on the eve of trial, ready to close a deal, or maybe it's just the sheer volume of the work that has you wondering if you'll ever get it all done. The problem is that you are under-resourced and while the associates you do have are well-intended, they are also inexperienced.

You appreciate everything your team members are doing *and yet,* on occasion, you express frustration directly to the associates with their late and subpar work. While in the moment, you feel completely justified or maybe can't help yourself *because you are so stressed out*, in retrospect, you know you don't want to show up this way. Ever.

In calmer moments, when you experience regret and even shame over your actions, you envision the kind of leader and lawyer you aspire to be. You want clients, colleagues and the community to know you as someone who delivers. Consequently, you drive yourself, your team members. But you also want your clients to respect and think of you as calm and in control when under stress.

And therein lies the problem. In the moment, it seems mission critical to push yourself and colleagues to deliver. And you push hard. But, instead of achieving

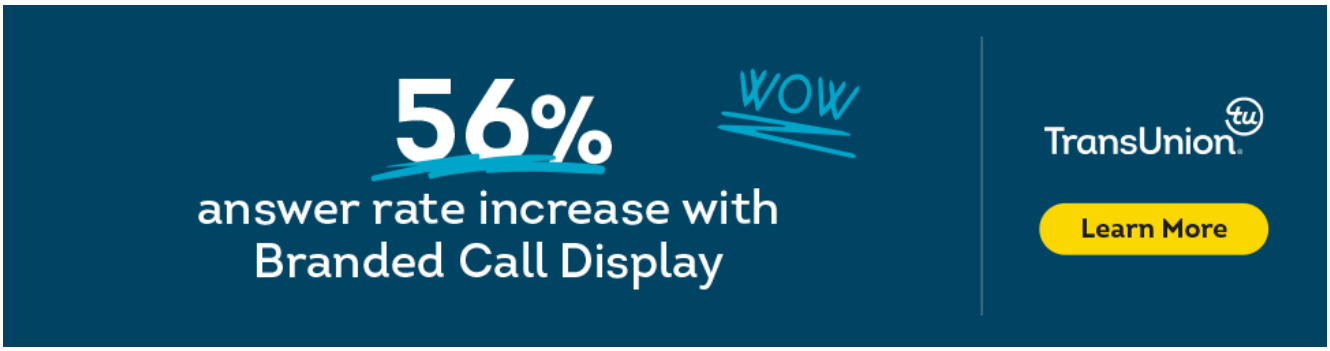
your desired result, you bring about the very thing you fear. Associates avoid you, even ghosting you when you need them most. They stop volunteering or saying "yes" to your work. In the midst of the fear and anxiety you helped to cause, you notice that people hold back in meetings, and then come the resignations. This results in even more stress and exhaustion as you worry about getting it all done.

What you are experiencing is paradoxical intent, a concept ascribed to Viktor Frankl, the renowned, psychiatrist, philosopher and concentration camp survivor. The paradox is that by pushing too hard for what you want, you get exactly what you are trying to avoid. In this case, it's little or no support. The harder you push your team, the more impatience you exhibit, the more you stress yourself and others, which is ultimately self-inflicted undermining.

As Carl Jung stated, "You meet your destiny on the road you took to avoid it."

In retrospect, these are times when we don't react as we want to––as we "should" as determined by our own standards and societal norms. When this happens, we often avoid dealing with the consequences of our actions, make excuses, point a finger or experience shame and chagrin. Of course, we'd rather just "not behave that way again" but haven't discovered the mechanism for doing so. It seems that sheer willpower isn't enough.

But insight is. Or at least it's the first step. What you––what we all wrestle with on occasion––is our own "shadow." A person's shadow is embedded in their subconscious, triggered by stress, and fueled by negative emotions such as anger, fear and jealously. When it surfaces, it's not pretty. We are stressed, ineffective and can resort to bullying, manipulation, conflict avoidance and micromanagement. We alienate colleagues, clients, friends and family. It's an unpleasant place to be as we subject others to our failure to manage stress. Too many or ill-timed shadow episodes can have disastrous effects on career and relationships.



Steps and Strategies for Regulating Your Shadow

So, what's a person to do about it? The best solution is to befriend your shadow so that you direct it rather than it directing you. This means getting to know yourself in what is likely a very different way.

1. **Uncover your stressors.** What stresses you? What happened the last time you behaved regrettably? Record these triggering events as the first step toward strategizing a more successful outcome.

2. **Define your shadow.** Next, take the short-form version of the actualized team assessment. The assessment not only reveals your primary leadership style, but how your style affects others when you are at your best and at your worst. Add those regrettable behaviors to the assessment's description of your shadow. If you regret how you behaved, these behaviors are your shadow's manifestation. You must name it to tame it.

3. **Define your shadow thinking.** Now that you've recognized other's suboptimal performance as "triggering" for your shadow, ask yourself what goes through your mind that causes you to behave out of character. What do you fear? It will likely be some version or combination of losing catastrophically, letting down and losing a client and professional embarrassment.

You have just befriended your shadow. Now it's time to regulate and mitigate it.

1. **Thoughtfully prepare by grounding yourself in objective thinking.** Lawyers typically know how to plan for what might go wrong. Apply this skill set to your management of others for better results and to avoid triggering your shadow. Remember that shadow thinking can be a result of a mismatch between expectations (hope) and reality (objective thinking). Thus, to improve the associate's output and avoid triggering your shadow, you must operate with a keen sense of the associate's capabilities. Reevaluate your expectations of each associate to avoid receiving disappointing work. Set reasonable goals, which means rightsizing the assignment or putting more of your own time into a project. Check in more often so that you provide timely guidance and prevent projects from going off the rails. See yourself as the manager and mentor that you need to be.

2. **Shift to a problem-solving mindset.** When under pressure to deliver and underwhelmed by the associate's work, immediately focus on next steps. This shift to a problem-solving mindset and away from the anger, blame and frustration is a shift away from the shadow and toward a better outcome for the client and your relationship with the associate.

3. **Pause and choose.** When you are triggered, pause to recognize it. Don't react. This alone will lessen the severity of the unpleasant experience for yourself and colleagues. Now, choose your response. Be thoughtful about your actions. If you aren't ready to discuss the problem, choose not to. Focus on the work. Wait until you have replaced your shadow with calm to provide feedback. When you do, be the teacher. It's not appropriate to vent.

While the process is simple, it isn't easy. While recognizing and regulating your shadow takes practice, it is worth the effort. You can do this!

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