



# TYLER WILSON

## BILL BACK BETTER

A VIEWPOINT ON THE OUTLOOK FOR LAW FIRM LEADERS

“While lockdown launched many of us into a still pond of domesticity, tranquillity and flexibility, law firm leaders were plunged into battle stations. To keep their ships afloat and successfully navigate the maelstroms of crisis management, remote management and change management, many will have summoned their inner Churchill.

With the recovery phase now underway, we offer a Viewpoint on the qualities required for the next stage of the voyage.”

One of the after-effects of Covid is that new words have entered the collective lexicon. In addition to furlough, epidemiology, herd immunity and WFH, we also learnt a word for the after-effects themselves: *sequelae*. The *sequelae* of Covid for patients, collectively known as Long Covid, are notable not only for the diversity of symptoms but also for their severity and duration. The pandemic *sequelae* may be no less idiosyncratic in the mark that they leave upon law firms.

In this Viewpoint, we redefine the six leadership styles identified by Daniel Goleman (‘Leadership That Gets Results’ in *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2000, pp.78-90) – all rooted in emotional intelligence or EQ – to outline the qualities required of the Long Covid leader.



## **COMMANDING...**

... because crises can set in fast and leave no time for consensus-building. Leaders drawn from a largely reactive business (such as law) may need to hone their skills of horizon-spotting and war-gaming, learn to plan for the unexpected and get ready to face down concerns and challenges with decisive action and the look of someone not for turning. In our experience, hard decisions are often better for being made by a small number of people. Two is often the ideal number – delays and fudges will only become baked-in as more cooks enter the kitchen.

## **VISIONARY...**

... because firms will inevitably be knocked off course when the iceberg strikes if it is uncertain or meandering. Aspiring to be number one in 'something to do with clients' is not enough. Few firms stand out in the current market, arguably because their partners are too preoccupied with the wind in their rivals' sails to worry about the cut of their own jib. Firms that can look past PEP league tables to find an identity rooted in something they are already good at stand a markedly better chance of maintaining cohesion during darker days. This sense of identity will also help them set a bottom line in the current salary wars, by respecting the need to protect working culture and well-being from an ever-upward ratchet of billable hours.

## **DEMOCRATIC...**

... because employee activism may be the latest flavour at work, fuelling both a demand for more empathetic, listening leadership and also an increasing sense of generational divide. It is now the oldies who feel ignored in the modern workplace, according to recent surveys. Partners who recall 'sucking it up' by the gallon as they clambered up the mudheap find it hard to accept not being seen as role models by the next generation and balk at also being expected to recalibrate their ears to Millennial sensitivities. The Long Covid leader will understand that the office weather is very local: there will be crosswinds and squalls along every corridor, testing their empathy in many directions at once.

## **COACHING...**

... because high-performing, self-motivated partners dislike being told what to do as much as they dislike being forced to decide issues outside their expertise. Long Covid leaders must allow decisions to be cascaded to the right level, and exert their influence without ever grabbing the tiller. Besides, all partners must be coaches now: to be a boss over Zoom is to provide a telescopic form of oversight hardly suiting the micromanager. Yet to be a coach is also

to be a sounding board and a counsellor – roles that may require your partners to attend the office more often than they might wish, to support the newly-qualified and trainee cohorts already there in their droves.

## **AFFILIATIVE...**

... because, following the WFH diaspora, trust is paramount. Thanks to the ingrained discipline of time-recording and the inherent professionalism of staff, productivity has not only held up, it has undermined the Taylorist arguments for standardisation, centralisation and oversight. The Long Covid leader understands that lawyers are more racehorse than pit pony, and that they will do their best wherever the going is suited to their style. Partners join for money, but stay for culture. The Long Covid leader will therefore want to enable the best work rather than the most work. The affiliative style means being available to everyone, but handpicking the few to take advice from. A leader's best ideas are almost always borrowed, so first they must be heard.

## **PACE-SETTING...**

... because there is still merit in electing the lawyers who make the greatest success of their own business in the hope that they can sprinkle their magic onto the whole business. Your firm's best partners are likely to excel in at least three of the four areas of leadership focus: clients, people, finance and structure; they will offer an example to lead by, modelling dynamism, demanding expectations and a relish for competition; and they can offer an attractive representation of the firm that boosts its standing with external audiences – clients, competitors and media.

In firms where a change of leadership is on the horizon, the possibility of losing an election can deter even the most confident candidates. This prompts a Kennedy-esque challenge to ask not what candidates can do for the firm but what the firm can do for the candidates. How about inventing some light-duty leadership roles in which they can showcase or develop their skills without compromising their billings? What about commissioning some informal polling and screening, to give candidates an early glimpse of their prospects? Why cannot every candidate be given a support team, and perhaps a coach, to polish and perfect their campaign and manifesto, so that the election is apt to resemble more a beauty contest than a horror show?

In short, the clearer you are about the qualities you need in your Long Covid leader, the easier it will be to bill back better. That way, your firm's plan for 'succession' won't turn into a TV melodrama.



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## **A BESPOKE COACHING AND ADVISORY SERVICE FOR LAW FIRM LEADERS IN THE UK AND INTERNATIONALLY**

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