



REFLECTION

**Everyday Leadership as a
Practicing Lawyer**

Kirtee Kapoor*

I have practiced law for the last seventeen years as a lawyer at Davis Polk & Wardwell. During this time, I have had the opportunity to live in New York, Germany, Hong Kong, and California and have had the privilege of leading projects and practices and serving many clients in hundreds of transactions. As I reflect on my own journey and what I have seen across many organizations, I have come to believe that leadership is an everyday job accessible to young lawyers from the start of their legal careers. I believe that every one of us can and must show up daily as both a leader and a follower, be an agent for positive change, and do our part to nurture and support a culture of inclusion and excellence in our profession and in the organizations to which we belong. For law students who might read this brief Reflection, here are some of my thoughts on the subject of leadership as a practicing lawyer and how I personally orient to them.

Leadership is persuasion. I believe that whenever we persuade others to adopt our viewpoint, we are leading. As practicing lawyers, we have opportunities to do this every day. We advocate positions when we represent clients. We lead and coordinate teams that help persuade counterparties, regulators, and judges to accept the positions we advocate. As our persuasion skills grow, our leadership skills grow because leadership and persuasion go hand in hand. The majority of my days involve working on transactions for clients, and each transaction presents a leadership opportunity to advance the client's interests and persuade others to find mutually acceptable solutions.

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Persuasion requires simplicity and clarity in communications. Our success as leaders depends on the quality of our communications—with others and with ourselves. I have a rule of thumb here: if I cannot explain it simply, I do not yet understand it myself. As practicing lawyers, we should endeavor to reduce complex ideas to their basic fundamentals. Arriving at simplicity and clarity in our communications requires hard work and a lot of thinking, but it is worth it. When we see complex ideas reduced to their fundamental aspects, we are able to see the big picture and connect the dots that we might otherwise miss. I see this all the time in my work. As young lawyers in the weeds, it is hard to see what matters most and how issues need to be prioritized and resolved. A transition occurs when lawyers spend the time to understand the big picture and talk it through with others. The myriad issues that all seemed equally important begin to fall into priorities and patterns, and creative solutions to address them emerge soon after.

Communication builds trust and tends to increase the scope of our responsibility. As we interact with people, the quality and sincerity of our communications build our reputations for effectiveness and trustworthiness. When our word becomes our bond, we are trusted with increasingly large roles and our impact and influence increases. Being relied on by others is the greatest privilege a “trusted advisor” can have, and it provides meaning to all the hard work involved in being a practicing lawyer.

As our responsibility increases, our vision expands. As our responsibilities expand, we are naturally able to see more of the project we are working on, the organization we belong to, and the ecosystem around us. As we understand and internalize the mission of the organization, and the environment in which it survives and thrives, our vision expands as to how that mission can be best achieved in the constantly changing world around us. Leadership, then, involves the implementation of this expanded vision in service of the organization.

Core virtues of leadership always remain the same. As our vision is trusted and our record underscores achievement, we may be trusted to formally lead projects, practices, offices, or even the whole organization. As our leadership muscles develop, I believe that we must continue to embody and practice the core virtues of optimism, humility, open-mindedness, tolerance for uncertainty, and decisiveness. Hope and optimism about the ability to achieve an articulated mission are essential qualities of a good leader. A good leader understands that everyone, including herself, has weaknesses, and she strives to see past them. Rather than critiquing weaknesses, good leaders build on strengths and bring out the best in the people they lead. Listening with humility is another great quality a leader must develop. No one has a monopoly on good ideas, and insights can come from the most unexpected sources. A leader listens and is not too quick to judge an idea right or wrong. In the real world, things are seldom black and white and rarely can we make perfect

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decisions. As professionals, our tolerance for uncertainty and our ability to make decisive judgment calls are the sine qua non of our effectiveness.

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Yesterday's answers do not solve today's problems. Leadership involves seeing just a little bit beyond the present and proceeding in the direction of our vision with confidence. In doing so, we should bring others along with us not by command but by consensus. Leadership does not just exist at the top of the organization or group; rather, it is available to us every day in whatever we do. If you choose to be a practicing lawyer and bring this attitude of consistent, persuasive, constructive, and forward-looking leadership to your work, I would like to tell you that a satisfying career awaits you. The legal profession will give you many opportunities for everyday leadership as you guide and help your clients and colleagues toward more agreement and more justice.