



From the President  
**Whit D. Bertch**  
THE BERTCH FIRM



Journal of Consumer Attorneys Associations for Southern California  
**ADVOCATE**  
September 2024

## Collaborative leadership

### BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE LEADER IN VOLUNTEER ROLES

Last month, I reflected on the meaning of success and explored what it is, how it is defined and how we can experience success in our careers and personal lives. I challenged my readers to define success for themselves and take action to pursue and fulfill their own success. This month, I challenge the idea of what it means to be a leader, and explore how to cultivate leadership qualities and be an effective leader in the legal industry, particularly in unpaid volunteer leadership roles like local TLAs, county bar associations or state-level organizations.

Let's put the facts on the table: Volunteer leadership is yeoman's work. While it may bring with it title, power, prestige, a resume boost or social or professional benefits, it also brings long unpaid hours of time, labor and commitment. Leading together is hard, but leading alone is even harder. In Shakespeare's *Henry IV, King Henry* laments that "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." Some leadership efforts may go completely overlooked while other efforts, however valuable, may soon be forgotten anyway.

Collaborative leadership, however, shares the work and delegates often, thereby minimizing mistakes and accelerating growth, both for each leader individually and for the organization. Collaborative leaders understand that there's a key difference between holding a leadership title and actually *being* a leader. I would challenge anyone who is currently serving in a leadership position to ask themselves, "Am I leading in my position as a leader or am I simply holding a leadership title?" Just holding a leadership title (president, vice-president, etc.) on its own means little. The followers make the leader, not the other way around. Leadership is about

impact and influence, not power and position. Indeed, I know many prominent leaders in the legal community who choose not to serve in formal leadership roles. Yet, they remain leaders in the community. They are moving the plaintiff's bar forward in their sphere of influence without title or position.

In my view, the threshold question any potential leader of an organization must ask themselves is: "Is leadership right for me?" I would argue that almost anybody can cultivate strong leadership skills and develop themselves into a strong leader. It begins by taking inventory of your personal strengths and weaknesses. And then, if the answer is yes, cultivating leadership strengths comes next.

Once you have identified your leadership style, strengths and weaknesses, play to your strengths. A sports coach once said "train your weaknesses, play your strengths." If I'm a soccer player and I struggle to shoot with my non-dominant foot, I'm going to work on improving that in practice, but I'm not taking a penalty kick with that foot. There's too much riding on the outcome. Success is not optional. As a leader, it is imperative to lead with your strengths to ensure the success of your team.

Yet, regardless of your individual leadership style or strengths, collaborative leadership is the ultimate goal in my view. Collaborative leadership allows people to discover their strengths and provides them with a voice and value. Various strengths will emerge across multiple leaders, contributing to a more robust group of leaders as a whole. In leadership, ego is stifling and must be left at the door. Empower each person on your board, each person chairing a committee and each person aspiring to move up in your

organization's leadership ranks by giving them opportunities to lead. A great leader doesn't prove to his followers how great *he* is, but rather, shows them how great *they* are and can become. As plaintiffs' lawyers, this notion fits hand-in-glove with juror empowerment and other closing-argument motifs.

Finally, lead from the front. Model collaborative leadership for your team so they can see what it looks like. Create open dialogue and discussion. Leading from the back is for war generals trying to avoid taking a cannon ball to the chest. I also strongly encourage attorneys to get involved in leadership as early in their careers as possible. Be bold. What younger leaders may lack in experience or wisdom, they make up for in innovation, energy and enthusiasm.

Although the year is far from over, I want to praise the leadership of the OCTLA executive officers and board of directors, and our new and fearless executive director. They have risen to the challenge and have answered the bell. Each one of our committee chairs has flourished in their roles and grown as leaders. Our education seminars have gone off without a hitch and our Gavel magazine publications have been among the highest quality in recent memory. Our summer law student mentorship program, which recently concluded, experienced its most successful year yet. All the way down the line, OCTLA's leaders have stepped up and taken ownership and responsibility for the success of this organization. They have done the work, and it shows.

