

Welcome to the Vandennack Weaver Truhlsen legal visionaries podcast brought to you by interactive legal here's your host Mary Vandennack.

Welcome to today's episode of Vandennack Weaver Truhlsen law visionaries, a weekly podcast discussing updated legal news as well as evolving methods of providing legal service. My name is Mary Vandennack, founder, CEO, and managing partner at Vandennack Weaver, LLC. I will be your host as we talk to experts from around the country about closely held businesses, tax trust and estates, legal technology, law firm, leadership and wellbeing for lawyers on today's episode. My guest is Cheryl, owner of Tarsus consulting, LLC out of Kansas City, Missouri. Cheryl has experience in developing training and performance improvement solutions for companies. Last time we talked to Cheryl, we discussed the importance of a strong team and how to measure and improve your teamwork. During that discussion, Cheryl spoke to the concept of the leader's critical role in building a strong team. Today, we're gonna talk more about leadership first. I want to thank our sponsors, interactive, legal and Carson, private client. Here's a message from interactive legal.

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Welcome back, Cheryl.

Thank you very much. I'm glad to be back here again and continue our conversation.

Last time we talked about teams and how to have teams be effective this time. We're gonna talk about the importance of the leader. What makes a good leader?

You know, there's there are probably 20, 25 adjectives I could give you about what makes a good leader. I have distilled him. I built on, Norman Schwartzkoff said at one point he said what makes a good leader is strategy and character? And if you can only have one or the other take character, and I loved that because I thought it was simple and it made sense. But I don't think it's enough. So, I, I would say five CS. I would agree with Schwartz cop strategy. I call it competence leader has to know have expertise in the field. They're in character is job one for sure. And character comprises a number of things. There's trust there. I mean, there's integrity. There is caring. There's, there's so much in that, that character but it's

necessary for people to, want to follow you communication, no matter how competent you are, how much you care about people, if you can't communicate it and convey that it, won't really matter.

You need confidence. The, the fourth C is confidence. You need confidence to be a good leader, no matter what, as a leader, you're gonna be making hard decisions. You're not gonna be able to make everyone happy all of the time. And you have to have the confidence in your own abilities to, to make those, make those calls. And then the last C is really curiosity. It's the, the concept of actively learning, being a lifelong learner and paying attention to what's going around you and, and being, not just caring about the people you work with, but being, being kind of curious about them, being curious about what's going on in the world about other interests and to be a, a more well-rounded kind of individual, I strongly believe makes you a stronger leader. So <inaudible>,

How do you get better at these skills?

Yes. well, expertise is, you know, that's one, I don't usually help my clients with, because that is one where, you know, seminars. I know you do a lot of speaking, Mary, those seminars, reading all of those things to stay up to date on what what it is that that's going on in your field. Character is an interesting one and I feel, you know, part of me says, gosh, you know, you either have a good character or you don't, you either have those kind of sound values or you don't. But what I found is that a lot of people with fabulous characters aren't great leaders, so they kind of lose it. So, they get involved in the day to day and they forget to credit their fellow employees. They forget to rely on what's most important to them in making decisions because their, their pressure cause they're they're pressured, or they they've got so much else they're thinking about.

So, from a character perspective and, and character and communication, I think are tied together because if you're not conveying character, it doesn't really matter what for, for that one. What I recommend is really defining, taking time to define what your character's about, what is important to you as a leader. So, it's not like you're building your character but you're defining it and providing yourself with clarity. What I rec every group I work with, I, I, we do kind of visioning exercises where we say before, we spend a lot of time learning how to be a better leader, define what kind of leader you want to be. And if you have not taken the time to say, what kind of climate do I want to create in my workplace? What kind of, what kind of leader do I want to be if you haven't reflected on great leaders you've worked with in the past, if you haven't thought about what you can learn from them, if you haven't thought about the poor leaders you've worked with and thought about what you can learn from them and, and distilled that into what you want to be as a leader, defined it for yourself and shared it with the people around you, if you haven't yet done that, you've really run the risk of not, not living by your values or letting them get set aside too early.

So the first step from a character and communication perspective is defining that and saying, what it is that you, what do you want to create? What kind of environment do you want? What kind of leader do you want to be? If that makes sense.

Yeah. And I know that for me, I was looking through those five CS as going well, I've seized has gone. Well, I think I've got confidence. I feel good about character. I feel good about confidence and curiosity, you know, while everybody else was watching power, watching Netflix, I was power watching classes and have few more degrees on my list. Right. But I would say that the, you know, I wanted to be somebody that people saw as the, and I can't remember exactly how you said it, but as caring and you know, really do care about my team, but I don't think I was ever communicating that so that my personal story is like, wow. You know, I think I shared on the other episode that we did how I'd walk in the back door and go into my office and start working and think it's enough to like, hey, we're kicking buns here.

We have a lot of work, let's get it done. Let's do quality work. And then you really realize that communication matters. And I can tell that's been a challenge for me in the legal business, it's an hourly rate type business and no everybody wants me to get through their work as quickly as possible so that there's less hours consumed. So, I move really fast. And so, the doing a lot of communication can slow that down except that what I learned, if you're really doing an effective job of communicating with others about what they can do. I think another example you've given is really listening to everybody in the room as opposed to just kind of sharing. I think that's one for me. I had an opportunity where I was on the American bar association. I served on a task force and that was one of the best examples of leadership that I ever saw where, you know, she'd start a meeting on time.

She'd listened to everybody in the room, and I'll never forget the exercise that we did. And you have to realize I've come out of a small firm where I was the decision maker. So I just make an execute, make decision execute, right? Let's do this. And now we've grown and I do have to function differently, which is why for me, that really matters to do something different. But this gal who led this particular task force and we had this, we were trying to make this decision about what recommendations we were gonna make to the house delegates mm-hmm <affirmative>. And so she had everybody get up and, and we were gonna like every idea that everybody had, it was written on a sticky note, put up on a board. Oh yeah. Was going like seriously, are we gonna really have everybody? And then we did the reorganize, the sticky notes into categories.

And then we voted those down to the best hundred. I, and I mean, we were presenting three ideas and I'm going, this process is tedious and we kept vote. And then we discussed each of those and developed those strategies, kind of using a similar process. And it took, I don't think I've ever invested so much time in a process, but all three of those ideas were adopted continue to operate today, which is many years later. And so I thought, well that is an example. And part of her leadership starting and ending on time, everybody in the room was listened to. There was never in one of these meetings in the three years I

served on this commission. There was never open conflict in a meeting. Yeah. There was discussion that was very engaged discussion, but she was always able to manage that so that I never saw an overheating. It was really one of the best examples I saw of great leadership.

You know, I love that. And, and it's interesting because that ties in, we, we talked before about commitment and a great leader will get commitment from people. And that exercise. One of the reasons people do that is because everyone has a chance to weigh in because you know, you have, everyone does their sticky notes. It's not just three people who do sticky notes. And when everyone weighs in no matter whether their specific concept is adopted they know they were heard and they know they were considered and then they can buy in. So that's one of the ways that's a, a great technique in meetings to make sure that you take advantage of all the ideas in the room and get, and get buy in from, from everyone in the room. So yes, that's, that is that's, that's a good example of ensuring you get all of that.

We are going to take a brief break from our episode for a word from one of our sponsors, Carson, private client

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Okay, let's continue our episode. So Cheryl, how else can you make a vision come alive?

One of the very best ways to make your vision come alive is to come up with, to, to develop and be tuned into your own stories. So every leader, every great leader I've worked with has had stories that they share with their team that describe their values and ultimately describe the values of the culture they're in. So I worked for early in my career, I worked for Mr. K, Mr. Kaufman, the guy who owned the Royal stadium started a pharmaceutical company years ago. And that, that company in the beginning had this fabulous culture. And part of it was Mr. K's story. He worked for a company and he was in sales. He worked his butt off and he was making a huge bonus and he was making more than anyone else than people two or three levels higher than him. So his company lowered his bonus.

So he went back and he worked hard again and he still was doing better than others. And finally his company put a cap on his bonus and said, you know what? We just can't pay you more than, you know, people a level or two above you. So what he did is he quit. And he started a company in his basement, selling calcium pills and his, everyone who worked there knew that story because one of his bedrock values was those who produce sharing the results. If you produce here, if you work really hard, you're gonna share in the results. And I'm never gonna put a cap on what it that you can do, because if you produce, you're gonna share. So that story created that culture and it, it just resonated with people and, and it brought to life some of the values in that organization. So I know I have heard you talk about your some work experiences you had in other firms that were good, but at one point you thought of being like a yoga teacher or something.

Yes. So, so that's what law firms very much have cultures. Yes. And the cultures are all are different. And when I started a journey, so I had started in a small family practice where we all held each other's backs and I thought, that's the way the world worked quite honestly. So then I joined, you know, law firms and found out that EV you know, people who are my partners, we didn't necessarily really have each other's backs. So when we were doing the team building episode, you talked about how sometimes you have a lot of contributors who are all solos. And a lot of law firms work a little bit like that. Each attorney has their own practice and they're doing their own thing and trying to bring them together in certain ways can be kind of challenging. And for me, you know, I really valued, I had a young son as I started on this path who was three years old, and I went to a law firm and they're a great law firm.

Absolutely excellent lawyers. But the culture of that particular law firm was very much were, you know, we used the word team, but maybe not always the way that I learned team in terms of what I thought about it. But particularly was the issue of how many hours they worked. And I came in and was supposed to be working at a different pace, but it didn't really work well, that was in the culture. So I literally started taking, and I'd been to three different law firms and said, okay, you know what? The practice of law is just not for me. This is just, I need to make a career change. So I went and trained to become both a yoga and plot's instructor. So I've trained in contemporary, Pilates and classical Pilates and various forms of yoga. And that's what I was gonna do because every morning when I drove to work, I would just get sick thinking about going in.

Well, along that path, all of a sudden, you know, and I was just getting ready to start my studio. Then instead came along a moment where I decided, you know, I'm just gonna go for my own firm, which I did, but we have also taken into that firm. One of our core values is wellbeing. And that's part of the, we were just working on some rebranding because we've done a merger and one of the partners goes, well, why do we have this wellbeing thing in there? I'm going, because that is fundamental to my brand. And you know, and I'm gonna leave if it's not part of the brand, I'm being a little facetious, but it's, it's super important in terms of what it represents. Most lawyers are type A's and people are like, why do you do yoga? I'm like, because I am a type a and so sitting down and taking some breath, keeps my shoulders from being in, you know, attached to my ears and things like that. Well, so once you create that vision, so that's been part of mind is to have a firm that is functional. I can say there's been a lot of failures

along the way. And I think we're there now. And it's, I think it's constantly, you have your vision. You have to sometimes remake your vision or, or how does that work?

Yeah. Your, your vision can evolve. But your fundamental, the values that when you tell people you work with that story, the values that come through, just in that explanation, I hope everyone who works with you knows that story because it says a lot about what you're about it should. I'm hoping, it says a lot, lot about your culture. So the fundamental stories likely stay the same. But as time goes on, you get new stories, you have new experiences, you, you have client interactions that resonate, and that really define who you want to be as a firm. And you share those stories and all of the, you know, people are wired to remember stories. They, they, they just remember it more than even if you have this beautiful pippy mission or vision statement, they may or may not remember that, but they're gonna remember the story they're gonna remember.

Mary almost was a Pilates instructor, right? Because she wanted a firm that was more balanced and that we're wellbeing mattered. And that's going to create your culture. I have a client in California and it's, she works for it's a me San Diego, county's Medicaid insurance organization. And the CEO tells a story. Every employee knows this story. When she was nine years old, she went into a doctor's office with her mother. Her mother only spoke Spanish. She went in because she was bilingual and had to translate for her mother. And she was treated like garbage by the people in the front. She was translating for her mother and they were being rude. And she said, when she was nine years old, she decided no one should be made to feel that way. And she decided this was a field she was gonna go in.

And what's interesting is every employee in this huge organization knows her story. And it says, and they remember it. And it says something about the kind of culture they want to create. We're never gonna be that way. And it's funny how even how negative stories kind of resonate too. So it's not all, you know, your story was, it wasn't a fit. It's not that it was a bad firm, but it wasn't a fit for this reason. Or I had a negative experience and I vowed that I was gonna do what I could to make sure others didn't have the same negative experience. So, so those stories as they evolve, you help your people find those stories, that support what your company wants to be about and your vision and your mission. They, they, they make a huge difference a lot more than just words.

And so what else do you need to do practically? So you've talked about identifying, considering the stories, sharing those stories, clear goals. What else do you need to do practically?

Yeah. So, you know, just practically you, you, you repeat those stories when you're making a decision you refer back to what your, what, what your values are when you're talking to your staff and you're in a meeting and you're, you're working through a decision. Well, we've decided as a company, this is our number one priority. So how would that impact this discussion we're having right now so that your values and mission comes alive? The other thing that's tremendously powerful, especially for a leader is

crediting people is, is making sure that you celebrate the successes that are consistent with your story and that you find opportunities and look for opportunities to credit people, sincerely not making up crediting. Okay. They were, you sincerely credit people for something they have done. That is a behavior that is aligned with what you want to be about. And when you consistently credit those both privately and publicly, you're reinforcing your culture. You, you are reinforcing the behavior. And as, especially as a leader, your words, the credits when, when you compliment someone, it means it means a lot for better or for worse. When a leader compliments someone, it tends to mean more than if a peer compliments someone. So that that's a, a real practical, easy way to reinforce direction and positive behaviors within an organization.

So yesterday we had a lunch. So we have a woman who, during the pandemic agreed to start writing what we call the Wednesday words of wisdom. So every Wednesday, the entire firm receives an email from Billy mad with words of wisdom that are always kind of positive reinforcing. And we thought we haven't really done anything. So we had a lunch yesterday. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>, it was a surprise lunch. We didn't tell her what the lunch was for, but to honor her for doing that for us through the pandemic. And it's continuing currently. So well, what else Cheryl, is there anything else practically speaking?

I love that. Yeah, the other piece is good leaders, listen, they pay. So the thing where, you know, they walk, we used to call it managed by walking around. That's not really practical nowadays with so many people virtual but they reach out to people and ask, okay, you know, how's it how's, how are things going? How are you doing, what are the challenges you're facing? And that may be informal, you know, the water cooler sort of stereotypical kind of thing, maybe come in early on a zoom call, that kind of thing, but it also can be it, can be more formalized. It can be, hey, I'm a CEO, but guess what? Once a month I'm meeting with three people that I don't usually meet with I'm and have lunch with them, bring them out to lunch and talk to them and listen and ask what their challenges are and make sure that I have my ear to the ground and I know what's going on. And that's an opportunity to reinforce culture. And it's also an opportunity to correct course if it needs to be and, and stay in touch with where your organization is.

And so we are at the end of our time, but do you have any last thoughts?

My last thought on whenever I think about leadership, I, feel it's really important that that leadership applies not just to the partner in a law firm or the CEO of an organization. I, don't care what your position is. You have an opportunity to be a leader. And so to think about what your, what your mission is and what kind of climate you want to create to credit one another, to be clear on what's important to you to be value centered is just as important for individual contributors as it is for the person kind of at the top of the pyramid, if you will. So there, there is application for leadership across the board.

Well, Cheryl, thanks so much for being with us today. I really appreciate it. Well, that's all for now. I want to thank our sponsors, interactive, legal and person wealth. Thanks for listening. Today's episode and stay tuned for our weekly releases.

Yeah.

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