



PROFILE

Virusha Subban

Partner

Baker McKenzie

A new way to lead

The landscape of leadership within South Africa's legal industry is changing. Once characterised by rigid hierarchies and authoritative leadership styles, today's successful law firms are embracing a more dynamic, empathetic, purposeful and inclusive approach. As a partner in a leading global law firm, I have observed firsthand how the shift towards servant and agile leadership models is transforming our industry, significantly influencing the motivation, satisfaction and productivity of our teams.

Effective leadership in law firms demands a departure from traditional command-and-control methods towards a model that is nimble, responsive and genuinely collaborative. In practice, this means being prepared to listen actively to our colleagues, inspire and motivate them, and provide an environment where everyone feels heard, valued and empowered. Crucially, leaders must still hold themselves accountable for the firm's successes and challenges, driving both performance and a strong sense of shared responsibility.

Historically, law firms have been perceived as strictly hierarchical, often relying on fear-based tactics to drive performance and compliance. This approach, however, has become increasingly ineffective and incompatible with the values and expectations of a new generation of lawyers. At our firm, we have intentionally blurred these hierarchical lines, creating space for open dialogue, and reducing barriers between different levels of seniority. The modern approach to leadership prioritises mentorship, collaboration, and a mutual exchange of knowledge – replacing intimidation with inspiration.

Central to this transformation is the concept of servant leadership, a model centred around leaders prioritising the needs and well-being of their team members. For me, servant leadership means recognising that our primary role as leaders is to support, nurture and empower those in our care. One of my guiding principles – encapsulated in this quote by Simon Sinek – is that “Leadership is not about being in charge; it's about taking care of those in your charge.”

Within the framework of servant leadership, I always advocate focusing on the three critical “Cs”: compassion, character and competence. Compassion ensures leaders remain empathetic and connected to the experiences of their teams, while character shows the importance of integrity and ethical leadership. Competence guarantees that, as leaders, we continuously develop our professional and personal abilities, thereby earning trust and respect through credible and consistent performance.

Practical examples of adopting servant leadership and agile leadership styles can be observed in the leadership of our firm. Agile leadership involves remaining flexible, adaptive and responsive to the rapidly changing demands of clients and the broader market environment. This agility enables firms to make swift decisions, adapt legal strategies, and ensure client needs are consistently met with exceptional standards.

We believe that transparency creates trust, and facilitates early identification and resolution of issues. For this reason, regular check-

ins with our people at all levels remains an important opportunity to connect and reinforce people centricity. Additionally, mentoring programmes and leadership training workshops have become integral parts of our firm's culture, cultivating future leaders who value collaboration, empathy and continual learning.

To new leaders entering the legal profession, my advice is straightforward: be prepared to lead by example. You do not need a title to be an effective leader. Your actions, interactions and attitudes significantly influence your team's performance and morale. Demonstrating humility, approachability and genuine interest in your team's wellness can profoundly impact their professional development and commitment to the firm. Your approachability and humility will establish the necessary trust and psychological safety essential for effective transparency, communication, teamwork and, ultimately, high performance.

However, despite the shift towards these modern leadership practices, there remain common pitfalls many leaders continue to face. One significant challenge is resisting the temptation to revert to authoritarian tendencies during high-pressure situations. Leaders must remain consistently committed to servant leadership principles, even when confronted with stress or uncertainty. Another frequent issue is insufficient active listening, where leaders fail to genuinely engage with feedback from their teams, resulting in missed opportunities for growth and improvement.

My own leadership style has been shaped significantly by personal experiences early in my career. Encountering leaders who were distant, unapproachable, hostile and overly critical profoundly affected my confidence and professional development. These experiences taught me the value of empathy and humility in leadership roles. By actively ensuring that I am approachable and supportive, I aim to create an environment that encourages openness, innovation and continuous personal and professional growth among younger lawyers.

As the legal profession in South Africa continues to change, the firms poised for enduring success will be those that embrace and embed these new leadership models. By prioritising servant and agile leadership principles, law firms can create thriving, resilient teams, better equipped to meet the industry's future challenges and opportunities. Ultimately, effective leadership today is less about exerting authority and more about enabling and empowering others to achieve collective success.

With over 20 years of expertise in customs, excise and international trade, Virusha Subban is a distinguished partner and head of the Tax Practice Group at Baker McKenzie in Johannesburg. She leads a niche practice that addresses complex cross-border indirect tax and trade issues for large corporates, multinationals and state departments. Her extensive experience includes advising on export controls, anti-dumping, and trade remedies across Africa. Virusha is highly regarded in her field, having received numerous accolades for her work in indirect tax and women in tax, and is a recognised leader in the legal community.

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