

Step into Power: Lead with Aplomb

For a firm to be successful, its leaders must create the circumstances for "1,000 flowers to bloom." As corny as this may sound, that is what great law-firm leaders do.

BY ANNE COLLIER
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For a firm to be successful, its leaders must create the circumstances for "1,000 flowers to bloom." As corny as this may sound, that is what great law-firm leaders do. More literally, it means providing the training and support necessary so that each lawyer thrives, delivering excellent client work and contributing positively to the firm's culture. Whether the law-firm leader is the managing partner, practice group chair, or a lawyer who manages others as part of a project, he or she needs to be able to get great results. The viability of the firm depends on it.

To achieve great results, a leader must transform a group of independent lawyers who, left to their own inclinations, will usually work in their own individual silos, into a team that focuses on common client goals, leveraging each others' strengths to surmount the intricacies and nuances of complex legal matters. It is essential that a firm provide cost-effective superior intellectual horsepower, because failure to do so relegates the firm to mediocrity and a future of competing to be the lowest-cost provider of commodity services. Thus, it's not just that clients pay more attention to fees; it's the fact that winning business requires that the firm deliver superior distinguishable results *efficiently*.

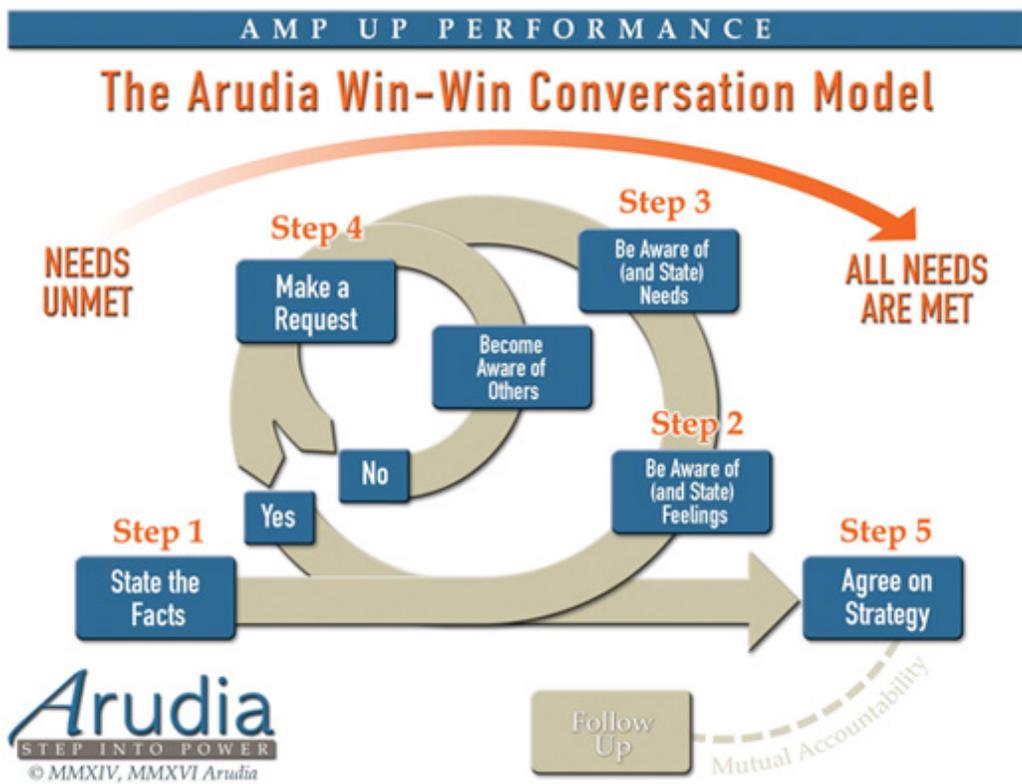
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Getting superior results, unfortunately, is not as simple as merely assigning tasks to the various team members. It requires leaders to cultivate collaboration among the smart, independent thinkers who are typically quite skeptical and often lack the desire to work on teams. It requires lawyers to lead with aplomb, which means building trust, harnessing diverse ways of thinking and problem-solving, achieving commitment to goals, milestones, deadlines and so forth, embracing accountability in a manner that promotes learning over blame, and focusing on client goals. The visual representation of this model — The Arudia Collaborative Approach — also highlights a key aspect of collaboration: that a group of lawyers transforms itself into a true team. For a visual representation of this model, please see below. Also critical is the need to maintain teamwork by continual attention to each step. The danger is that a failure at any one step erodes the ability to achieve success at other steps.



When I counsel lawyers in my workshops, I offer the following tools:

1. The Arudia Win-Win Conversation Model



Best for transforming potentially difficult conversations, where there will likely be a “loser,” into an

opportunity instead. This model (see the graphic above) is particularly useful in situations in which your needs appear to be in opposition to the needs of another. Win-Win Conversations require you to shift perspective to solution orientation rather than blame orientation. Also of note is the importance of stating facts neutrally and without judgment to avoid triggering defensiveness; awareness of others; and making requests rather demands. To have a Win-Win Conversation follow the model:

Step 1. State the Facts neutrally and without judgment. This means stating the facts very concisely and avoiding loaded words such as “should” while maintaining a matter-of-fact demeanor and tone.

Step 2. Be Aware of and State Feelings as you deem necessary. Feelings such as concern and frustration are common and generally considered acceptable in the workplace. The key is to separate unpleasant feelings about a situation from the person who typically would be held responsible. Failure to do so can result in a blame game and detract from achieving client goals.

Step 3. Be Aware of (and State) Needs as necessary. It’s important to distinguish between needs and the range of strategies that might satisfy those needs. Leaders keep their eyes focused on goals and are not distracted by team members confusing their own strategy with the goal.

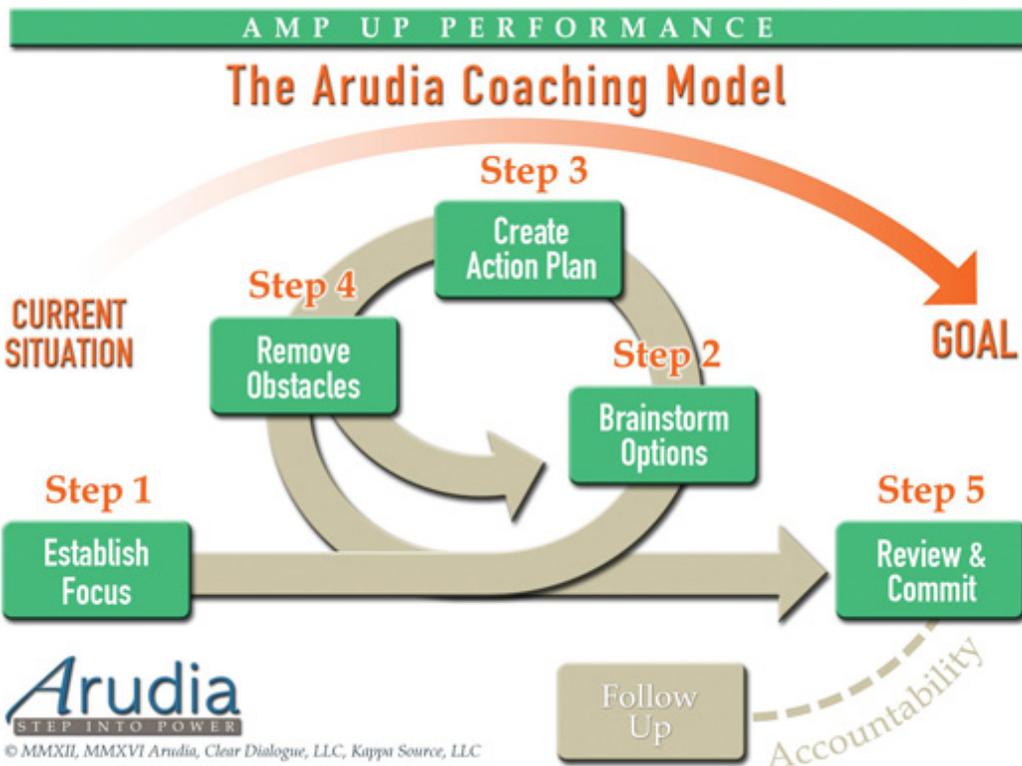
Step 4. Make a Request using the “magic” language, “Would you be willing to ... ?” The phrase is effective because it is clearly a request, as distinguished from a demand. This is more likely to foster collaboration and alignment.

Step 5. Agree on Strategy by working through details such as deadlines, work product, and resource needs to avoid misunderstandings.

2. ‘Telling’ Is an Appropriate Communication Tool

This method is used to share expectations, needs, goals, new information, and training. Most people readily use this tool, and find it easy to do so.

3. The Arudia Coaching Model



The Arudia Coaching Model (see the graphic above) and Coaching Skills (the asking of one or more targeted, open-ended questions) are best for collaboratively solving problems, supporting a colleague's best thinking, and engaging and empowering more junior lawyers as well as peers. The coaching model outlines a five-step problem-solving process. The use of open-ended questions at each step is the hallmark of coaching. Successful leaders follow the entire model or use targeted open-ended questions as needed.

Step 1: Establish the Focus of the conversation, which means asking open-ended questions to clarify the topic, goal and takeaway for the conversation. This is the one step of the model where a leader is likely to establish the goal by stating it and making sure it is understood.

Step 2: Brainstorm Options. Ask open-ended questions to support a colleague in identifying options.

Step 3: Create the Action Plan. Again, ask open-ended questions to support a colleague in developing an action plan. This step is particularly important for colleagues who garner comfort from working out detailed steps.

Step 4: Remove Obstacles. Ask open-ended questions to support a colleague in identifying challenges to successfully executing the plan created in Step 3, on a timely basis.

Step 5: Review & Commit. Ask open-ended questions to support a colleague in reviewing and committing to what will be done, by whom, by when and establish a follow-up schedule. This is the most forgotten step, but it is important to ensure alignment regarding the plan and the schedule.

Follow Up

Ask open-ended questions to help a colleague identify what worked, what didn't, and the opportunities for improvement. In this manner, accountability is a positive, supportive experience.

There are a range of communication techniques between Telling and Coaching: offering advice, offering guidance, and making suggestions. Importantly, there are times, for example, when a leader will need to both advise and empower by transforming advice into a suggestion; this is a coach approach but not quite coaching.”

Win-Win, Telling and Coaching Skills are all valuable tools for leading, collaborating, and solving problems. Your choice of tool(s) depends on your assessment of the pros and cons of using each tool (in part or in full) and your goals for the conversation. So why is it that leaders who lead with aplomb use these tools? It’s because instead of merely reacting or hoping that “it’ll work out,” great law-firm leaders set their team up for success by intentionally communicating in a manner that builds trust, harnesses diversity, achieves commitment, embraces accountability and focuses on goals.

Anne Collier focuses on improving culture, collaboration, and communication in at law firms and other organizations. She is a frequent speaker and author, and created *The Workplace Toolkit — Actionable Approaches To People Problems*. Reach her at anne@arudia.com.

The views expressed in the article are those of the authors and not necessarily the views of their clients or other attorneys in their firm.

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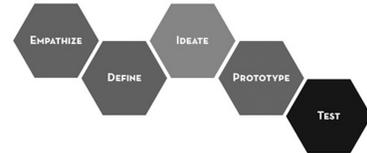


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