
Hiring to Firing Podcast — Leading the Ted Lasso Way: Cultivating a Positive Leadership Mindset**Hosts: Tracey Diamond and Evan Gibbs****Guests: Steve Lewis****Recorded 8/1/24****Tracey Diamond:**

In light of the upcoming election, we are excited to announce a three-part series in which we are going to discuss various forms of leadership styles, as well as political discourse in the workplace. Today's episode is on leadership, and we're going to talk about our favorite leader on TV, Ted Lasso. As Evan and I were thinking about the qualities that make a good leader, it occurred to us that being a leader is often like being a parent. What are your thoughts, Evan, on good parenting skills, that sort of segue into good leadership skills?

Evan Gibbs:

I think a lot of the same skills are involved in both, right? In both situations, you're mentoring somebody who's most likely much younger than you, probably way less experienced, and you're trying to guide them into developing skills, helping them navigate difficult situations, and just overall helping them grow as a person. So, there are so many parallels between the two.

Then, of course, Ted Lasso is a dad. We talked about his positive view, his eternal optimism is really inspiring to those that he leads. I think the same can be said for parents. If you've got that optimism, then it gives you the right mindset to approach your kids or your employees, and that's a lot of what we're going to talk about today with Steve Lewis, the outgoing chairman of our law firm. So, stay tuned. Hopefully, you'll get some good nuggets of wisdom on leading a large organization.

[INTRO]

Tracey Diamond:

Welcome to *Hiring to Firing* the Podcast, I'm Tracey Diamond, and I'm here with my co-host, Evan Gibbs. We are both labor and employment attorneys at Troutman Pepper, and together we handle all workplace issues from *Hiring to Firing*.

Evan Gibbs:

Thanks, Tracey, and we're very excited to welcome Steve Lewis to our podcast today. Steve's immediate past chair of our firm, Troutman Pepper, where he spearheaded and led the firm through its largest merger today when Troutman Sanders, Pepper Hamilton, joined to become Troutman Pepper, a top 100, I think top 50 firm with more than 1,100 attorneys in 23 cities. Then, to make things even more complicated, the firm merger took place in July 2020 in the height of the pandemic. It was quite a time for everyone. I'm sure it was a really fun time for Steve.

In addition to his work on behalf of the firm, Steve's also an accomplished corporate practitioner where he is counseled clients throughout the business lifecycle, including representing companies and mergers and acquisitions, and serving as outside general counsel to closely held companies and family-owned businesses.

Tracey Diamond:

Steve, we are so thrilled to have you on board with us today. While many of our listeners know about your work as chair of Troutman Sanders and now Troutman Pepper, my guess is that your personal story is less well-known. So, we thought we would start by asking you to tell us a bit about your background, your family, why you decided to become a lawyer, and what caused you to move from practicing lawyer, to law firm management, to leader of an Am Law top 50 law firm?

Steve Lewis:

Great. Thank you both. I'm delighted to be here and part of this really impressive podcast that you all have done so well for so long.

I grew up in a small town in North Carolina outside of Charlotte. My dad was a Presbyterian preacher. My mom was a junior high math teacher, and it was very much the idyllic Mayberry setting from Andy Griffith. After high school, I went to the University of North Carolina for undergrad and law school, and I spent my second summer in law school at Troutman Sanders here in Atlanta. I love the city. I really love the firm. So, I joined it out of law school in 1991 and I'm still here 33 years later.

I eventually married one of my law school classmates and we have two daughters, one of whom is in law school and the other is a rising senior in college. Going back to the law choice, I feel very lucky. In high school, I figured out I wanted to major in accounting and then go to law school based on some family friends that were accountants and lawyers. I'm not really sure how well that went over with my friends when I told them what I thought I wanted to do. But it was great for me. I planned on a career in tax law. But during my summer at Troutman, I switched and focused on corporate M&A work. I love the constant problem-solving, exposure to so many different areas of the law, and really enjoyed the business aspects learning the different industries where our clients are in.

So, from doing that, it became something of a natural extension to focus on the firm itself. I ended up being asked to run the corporate practice group, and that was my first exposure to firm leadership. Over time, those areas broadened, particularly with a couple of the early mergers Troutman Sanders had done. Eventually, the firm asked me to serve as the managing partner. Very exciting times.

Here we are almost 14 years later and a little hard to believe. It was challenging work sometimes, but overall, great fun and just really proud of what the firm and all of its people have accomplished over that time. The highlight, of course, being the Troutman Pepper merger back in 2000.

Tracey Diamond:

I'm curious, Steve, what that must have felt like from your point of view to have to work your way through the merger in the pandemic, when the pandemic itself was just so new. Is there any particular takeaways from that experience?

Steve Lewis:

It did not lack for excitement, that's for sure. We luckily had started all of the prep work for the merger in the middle of 2019. So, much of it was done and we were focused on an April 1st start date in 2020 for the merger. Obviously, in the middle of March, when we shut the doors for a while, along with the rest of the world for COVID, we didn't know what that would mean, but we had done enough of the back-office work to get ready. Our lawyers and our admin team were on the phone and Zoom and everything with each other. We realized as we got further into the year, we were ready and we could do it. So, we did pull the Trigger, July 1. It was a crazy time. Lots of conversations from home and all kinds of other places and issues that no one on either side had ever dealt with before in terms of what do you do to protect the ability to practice and help our clients. What were they going to be doing? No one really knew what that was going to look like. But we coordinated the efforts and pulled it off in a manner that worked really well, given the circumstances.

Tracey Diamond:

I'll say. It's been a very successful merger and a very exciting time for the firm over the last couple of years, for sure.

So, our topic for today is leadership. Of course, Steve is the perfect guest for this topic. The special sauce that makes someone an effective leader. What better TV show to kick off this discussion than one of the very best leaders we have ever seen on TV, our favorite Ted Lasso. For those who haven't watched the show, we highly recommend that you do. Ted Lasso is an American college football coach who's hired by Rebecca Welton, owner of the AFC Richmond to coach the UK soccer team.

Despite knowing virtually nothing about the sport, Ted Lasso manages to win over his team and the fans with his down-home and whimsical leadership style. Let's listen to our first clip.

[VIDEO CLIP START]

Ted Lasso:

Rupert, guys have underestimated me my entire life. And for years, I never understood why. It used to really bother me. But then one day, I was driving my little boy to school and I saw this quote by Walt Whitman, and it was painted on the wall there. It said, "Be curious, not judgmental." I like that.

So, I get back in my car and I'm driving to work, and all of a sudden it hits me. All them fellas that used to belittle me, not a single one of them were curious. They thought they had everything all figured out, and so they judged everything, and they judged everyone. I realized that they're underestimating me, who I was had nothing to do with it. Because if they were

curious, they would ask questions. Questions like, have you played a lot of darts, Ted? Which I would have answered, "Yes, sir. Every Sunday afternoon at a sports bar with my father from age 10 until I was 16 when he passed away." Barbecue sauce.

[VIDEO CLIP END]

Evan Gibbs:

What are the takeaways from this type of leadership style, in your opinion?

Steve Lewis:

Well, it illustrates the dangers particularly a brand-new leaders and Ted shows how to act and avoid those deadfalls. But one of the things new leaders often struggle with is they think they know it all day one. They try to do too much on their own, and they want to get in and fix things quickly, and in the manner that they think is appropriate. The reality is, as Ted notes, is the best decisions are usually informed by asking a lot of questions, engaging in conversations and doing real fact-finding as a team, whether that be numbers or dollars, clients, individual opinions and reactions in the organization, all of those things really contribute to an effective leadership style.

I mean, Ted makes no assumptions. He asks questions. He listens to the answers. he encourages others to speak. Ultimately, he's going to decide, that he wants to speak last after hearing what others have to say. That's a really important message for particularly new leaders.

Tracey Diamond:

Attorneys tend to be overachievers and I would say micromanagers. How do you avoid that sort of instinct to want to just control everything and not give room for your teammates to support you and provide their own ideas and get some of the work done? How do you balance that need to manage with the need to delegate?

Steve Lewis:

Well, it's a challenge, and it always is, I think, for any leader. There's an old African proverb that I used to quote my first several years as managing partner that says, something along the lines of, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." The upshot of that is the path to real success is when you're collaborating with like-minded people working towards the same goal. You can't do it by yourself. You need the broader team really invested in the goal. They've got to be involved in helping to meet that goal. You've got to really focus on being intentional about praising those type of accomplishments and positive reinforcement for the good ideas and really rewarding and recognizing all the teammates that contribute in those different ways.

Part of that is just you get in a routine. You have to tell yourself, ask a question, listen to the answers. Some of them may be a little crazy, but you never can tell what that might lead to. Some of our best ideas have come from things that were made in jest at the front end. You've just got to be open to it and really affirmatively go seek that input.

Tracey Diamond:

A way that makes people feel comfortable providing it without being put down for raising what may be an outlandish idea, right?

Steve Lewis:

Absolutely. A sense of humor helps, right? You want people to feel comfortable expressing their views, and ultimately, they've got to feel invested in part of the initiatives that the firm itself is doing. That's what builds the culture. It fosters loyalty, the commitment and the stickiness to the firm, helps with retention. Because ultimately, particularly for a law firm, it's about finding, recruiting, and retaining the top talent so that you can best serve your clients in an effective manner.

Evan Gibbs:

Is there anything in particular that you've found that gets – it doesn't have to be specific to lawyers, but I guess since we're at a big law firm, is there anything that you've seen that helps in particular getting folks invested in the overall goals or strategy of the organization? Because I know, like at our law firm, there's so many different practice groups and industry groups. I'm curious what you've seen in terms of getting everybody rowing in the same direction, as you've got 1,100 plus lawyers, everybody's going to do in their own thing. How do you get everybody pointed the same goal?

Steve Lewis:

Sure. I think part of that analysis is you've got to be clear with what the goals of the organization are at the top level. But then you've got to recognize, and our firm's a great example, with over 1,100 lawyers and so many different practice areas. One size doesn't fit all. Everyone's ability to contribute or the manner that they're going to contribute are going to differ from people across the firm. So, one of the things we always push for was focus on what you can control, your practice, your group, what you're doing day to day. If you raise the bar for yourself and your practice and everyone does that, the collective tide rises so much that the firm makes strides forward that it couldn't do without that type of initiative.

So, we would tell people, everyone has different levers they can pull or buttons that they can push. Just make sure you're doing it for yourself. Focus on the overall goal of the firm, and impact it where you can. That's a little bit tougher message because it becomes the individual message rather than just the collective one. But the power of those two together where you never lose sight of where we're going as an institution, but you also want to be open to all of our people being able to help get us there in whatever facet they can do is a really powerful tool.

Tracey Diamond:

One of the things that's magical about the Ted Lasso character is he's so confident, but yet he's not cocky. Throughout the show, his motto is, believe in yourself. I believe he has that actually on a sign above the locker room and the teammates are constantly sort of hitting it on their way out the door, or believe, I think is the shorthand version of that. How do you think Ted instills this in his team and how do you foster that in a law firm environment? I know, sometimes I could say

for myself, I often will suffer from imposter syndrome, and how do you give somebody the confidence without having them go too far where they're not effective?

Steve Lewis:

Yes. That's a powerful message of his, just the one word, believe, and it is critical. He turns a team around by getting them to believe in themselves and in each other. It starts generally with him believing in each of them. He sees something and makes the assumption that if channeled appropriately, they're going to come through in ways that they may not even understand and appreciate how much value they'll add.

So, he fosters that. He shows them, he believes in them. He empowers them to speak, to take action, to really help offer input into what the organization needs to be successful. It's never about him. He never makes it about himself, which makes it much easier for others to believe in themselves and in the collective organization. Because if it were all about Ted, that makes it much harder for someone to really believe in themselves because there's the potential only one can be right. When it's that broader collaborative approach, that's where the magic happens.

On TV, it worked great, but it also works great in reality. At the end of the day, we can have the best plan in the world. But if all of our people aren't invested in it and confident that they're going to be contributors and help us achieve it, we're not going to get there. So, making sure everyone understands where we're going, what part they can play, and that we've got their back and want to help them do the best job they can, that really makes all the difference.

Tracey Diamond:

So, one of Ted Lasso's best leadership traits is his ability to recognize and develop talent, even from the most unlikely of sources. An example of this is the talent he sees in the Kitman, sort of like a laundry person, whom Ted dubs Nate the Great. Under Ted's tutelage, Nate rises from Kitman to a talented coach. Let's listen to a clip where Ted encourages Nate to express his ideas.

[VIDEO CLIP START]

Ted Lasso:

Now, look, our whole offense right now is all give-and-go. Give the ball of Jamie and everyone else can go to hell. So, I am officially on the prow for any new ideas. You hear?

Nate:

Oh.

Ted Lasso:

You got something, Nate?

Nate:

No. So, no, God, no, never mind. I'm sorry.

Ted Lasso:

Come on now, you're one of us, let's go. Fire away, what do you got?

Nate:

Okay, right. The pocket. Not that one. You know what, it's not very, even very good. It's probably really bad. You know what, it's embarrassing even.

Ted Lasso:

Sorry, Nate, I have a real tricky time hearing folks that don't believe in themselves, so I'm going to ask you real quick again. Do you think this idea will work?

Nate:

Yes, I do.

Ted Lasso:

Whoa! Why are you screaming at us, Nate? We're right here. All right, come on now. Walk us through it.

Nate:

Okay. So, I thought if we start the attack on the wing, Jamie could run through near side, then when the defense follows, Sam could fill his spot.

Ted Lasso:

So, use Jamie as a decoy?

Nate:

No. No. Well, yes, in this case, yes.

Ted Lasso:

Let's give it a shot.

Nate:

What, you're going to use my play?

Ted Lasso:

Yes. I mean, we're going to try it on, see if it fits. It might not. Then again, it might be a very flattering silhouette. I might wear it right out of the store. Makes me feel good. I start to strut. I'm like, "Ooh, I like this. I like the way this makes me feel." Show me a strut, coach.

[VIDEO CLIP END]

Evan Gibbs:

Steve, what have you found to be the most effective way or some of the most effective ways to develop young talent? For example, in a law firm, the associates who are right out of law school or in their first few years as a practicing lawyer, what are some things you've seen that are successful in that way?

Steve Lewis:

Young lawyers are a lot of fun. They show up. They're excited. They're energetic. They're ready to go and get on with their career and they have the ability to learn at just an amazing pace. But they take a lot of work. As more senior attorneys, to really do it well, we've got to challenge them, we've got to teach them, and then we've got to guide them and help channel their energy and excitement as they learn those skills. That approach, those basics apply for all of them, but very different methods work depending on who that is. Not all young lawyers respond to the same type of challenges or teaching or guidance.

We all had mentors when we were young and developed our skills and they helped us develop our styles. But they were also, most of them able to change and adapt their styles based on the 5, 6, 7, 10 young associates they would work with over time. We've got to do that as well. But at the end of the day, the key parts, everyone's got to have an opportunity to succeed. We've got to give them honest feedback. We've got to help build their confidence level. And when you do all of that, it's a lot of fun to watch the light come on as they figure out what the practice of law is all about and some of the things they can do and take it in new directions that we might not have got there without.

Tracey Diamond:

Ted also recognizes and develops talent in my favorite character of the show, Roy Kent. When Ted arrives, Roy is a once great, now disgruntled soccer player, who is almost at the end of his career and refuses to have anything to do with his teammates. Ted continues to mentor and push Roy until he becomes an integral part of the team, serving as the teammate captain and eventually a coach. Why do you think that Ted focuses on Roy? What did he see in Roy as a leader? And given that he was almost at the end of his career, why choose Roy?

Steve Lewis:

Well, Roy is the other end of the spectrum from the young players or lawyers, but he represents that category with people with years of experience, practical, substantive, everything else. It's such an important aspect of the organization, whether it be the team or, in our case, in the law firm. Those of the people we've really got to focus on as the teachers for the next generation,

the middle generation, building skills of everyone else that hasn't had the opportunities of practical experience that they have at this point. They've got a wealth of knowledge and they can help make the organization and its people better, more tighter-knit, more successful. You've just got to figure out how to tap into it.

In Ted's case with Roy, it took a while, and that's not unusual, right? I mean, you see challenges in that population sometimes. They're often very busy. Sometimes they're tired. Change has happened at such an incredible pace. Occasionally, they feel passed by or passed over, and it takes some effort to make sure they stay connected to the organization and to the new generation that's going to take the organization forward. I think Ted really recognized all of those things that Roy and made a concerted effort to get him on board and help get him invested and what the future was going to hold and how he could contribute to that.

Evan Gibbs:

Is there anything in particular you've seen, Steve, that helps motivate more senior, I guess here, attorneys, but that would really apply to staff members or anyone else at the senior level? Anything in particular, any takeaway of you've seen from your time in leadership?

Steve Lewis:

I think it's really important to make sure they know no one's taking them for granted. That's reminding them just how important they are to our firm, to the future of our firm. We've done things like pair them with young attorneys or really encourage them to work with young attorneys in their group or other groups. We've also been – we've tried to be very open with them on the changing expectations for their day-to-day roles as they get closer and closer to retirement. Part of that is we want their job to shift some. We want them to be leaving a legacy and spending time making sure their clients, their practice, their team are going to thrive after they retire as well. That, by definition, entails really engaging with that next generation who's going to step in to those roles.

As they do that, we celebrate it. We recognize what they're doing. We highlight it for others in the firm, for our clients. And we often will send young lawyers to them. "Oh, you've got questions. You should go ask this really senior person. They've seen a lot. They can provide great guidance on how to talk with a new client, how to approach a tough case, how to get a deal closed in short order." Really, the ultimate goal is when they walk out and retire, we want every one of them to be super proud of what they and the firm accomplished during their time here, but equally excited about what lies ahead for the firm and the clients and team they're leaving behind.

Evan Gibbs:

I'll tell you another topic that comes up, but I'm sure you've had to deal with in your time, Steve, are some big egos. On the show, Jamie Tartt, he was one of the other main characters, and he's sort of a spoiled superstar. He's young and cocky. At least the beginning of the show, he didn't care about his team, the team itself, for there's other team members. He really was only focused on himself. Over the course of the show, Ted, of course, he convinced him to take a step back and let some of the other teammates shine. How did Ted turn him around? I'm

curious, what are some strategies that you've used for dealing with some of the bigger egos? Because I know that that presents its own set of very unique challenges, I suspect.

Steve Lewis:

It absolutely does. As we alluded to before, I believe a strong organization really stands on teams, not on individuals. The best lawyers in the world can only do so much by themselves. They've got to have an effective team with them to really scale the practice and take it to the levels that they really want.

It's kind of the old question of, do you want to be an all-star on a losing team? Or do you want to be celebrating a championship as part of a well-oiled machine? And that's the same analysis for a law firm. I think, in Jamie's case, he had to leave and go elsewhere to see that that path he was on wasn't going to be as personally fulfilling as it would be to come back and play together and do great things as a more contributing part of the team. It's back to the problem I mentioned before, if you're going to go far, you've really got to go together, and there's not a lot of room for ego in that togetherness.

The long-term, sustained organizational success is more rewarding. It's usually more lucrative at the end of the day. It's more exciting and it's more fun than just those individual accolades. As you figure out how to deal with people like that, you've got to have open conversations with them. You've got to encourage them to do the things where they're really reaching out and embracing others on the team, rather than trying to take all the glory for themselves. You've got to reinforce by example, point to others, promote the great examples of teamwork in the firm. So, everyone sees it and has a model that they can follow.

Ultimately, if you don't bring them into the fold and you cater to those individual-focused superstars, it flies in the face of Ted's basic lessons of how to lead. You're not really listening. You're not really believing at everyone. You're selling out to the loud voice that thinks it needs to be like this or like that, and you try hard to bring them in the fold but, just similar with a sports team, in the rare circumstances, that's not going to work, you've got to be willing to think about doing what sports teams do and trade for a few young prospects and build that team from the ground up the way it needs to be to really help the organization become that successful. But no doubt, it's hard.

Tracey Diamond:

Very hard decisions for sure. Yes, those are hard decisions. I thought it was really interesting seeing how Roy and Nate contributed to the turnaround for Jamie as well. I think that really is kudos to Ted for bringing up Nate, at the time anyway, in that season, being willing to listen to his ideas. It was his idea to pull Jamie back and make him a decoy and not have him be the superstar for a particular play. Then building up Roy to become the leader that he was, that eventually he becomes Jamie's mentor. So, by building both of those characters, Nate and Roy, he ultimately is building Jamie's character as well. In a way, to your point, Steve, it involves scale, right? And not just one-on-one, Ted to Jamie.

Steve Lewis:

Absolutely. That's the special sauce of all of it is making sure you've got strong, cohesive teams, and grow those teams.

Tracey Diamond:

So much easier said than done. Our last character that we wanted to talk about is the owner of the team, Rebecca Welton. She became the owner as part of the divorce settlement and hired Ted because she wanted him to fail and to run the team into the ground to get back out of her ex-husband. Ted manages up to her and eventually changes her attitude about the team completely. What lessons can we take away from this concept of managing up? And are there lessons here about managing employees who let their personal lives cloud their business judgment?

Steve Lewis:

So, managing up is always particularly tricky. Part of the reason is it's typically needed to get a leader refocused on the concepts we've discussed up to this point in today's podcast. It's a fine line to walk between being thought-provoking and an inspirational change agent to get the leader focused, versus coming across as an overly ambitious know-it-all. It's always heavily dependent on personalities, but kind of the guiding principles, no matter who the leader is, managing up can't be overly threatening to that boss. If so, they often will shut down and will not attribute the commentary to good purposes, but for individual purposes instead.

The second part of that is you've really got to find a way to get through to them and then back off and give them the time to think about it and reflect on it, and ultimately make the decision themselves or come to the realization themselves about what that right course of action is. That can be a regular conversation like Ted's weekly meetings where he brought cookies for Rebecca. But it has to be somewhat persistent without giving up, because often if you just do it once or twice, it doesn't sink in quite as well. The personal lives impacting business judgment, it's human nature. It happens to all of us at some point in time. What we've got to do is pay attention. If we see it in ourselves or see it in those above us in the organization, we can't be afraid to bring it up, to inquire about it, to offer support, help, whatever that is.

As I said, it's going to happen to all of us at some point in our careers. It's just human nature. We're going to need that help and we've got to be able to rely on team-first people, whether they're above us in the organization, on par, or below us. It shouldn't matter if the message is, "Hey, what's going on? And let's go back to things that we've already agreed we want to be focused on and working towards." That's a powerful benefit of a really effective team.

Tracey Diamond:

Well, Steve, this has been such an interesting conversation. We really thank you for your time and your wisdom today. Thank you to our listeners for checking us out and listening in. Don't forget to take a look at our blog, hiringtofiring.law. Also, check out our other podcast episodes and shoot us an email. Tell us what you think. We'd love to hear your recommendations for TV shows and movies and workplace issues. Thanks so much for listening.

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