

4 LEADERSHIP SKILLS FOR MOVING UP THE LEGAL CAREER LADDER

By Charles A. Volkert III, Esq.

Charles A. Volkert is executive director of [Robert Half Legal](#), a premier legal staffing service specializing in the placement of attorneys, paralegals, legal administrators and other legal professionals with law firms and corporate legal departments. Based in Menlo Park, Calif., Robert Half Legal has offices in major North American and global markets and offers a [full suite of legal staffing and consulting solutions](#).

When identifying candidates for legal jobs and promotions, many employers list the competencies requirement, “leadership skills.” But what exactly does that mean? And how do you call out these skills on your application and in the job interview, particularly if you’re not yet in a supervisory role?

A [Robert Half Legal survey](#) asked attorneys from major companies and law firms in the United States and Canada to identify the qualities a law firm or corporate legal department leader should possess. Here are the four leadership attributes they identified as most important, plus our suggestions for developing these particular [soft skills](#) and giving your leadership potential some extra shine:

1. Good judgment

The ability to apply good judgment and make sound decisions was ranked first among nearly half of the 350 lawyers we interviewed. Good leadership requires making decisions effectively, alone or in collaboration with others.

Whether you’re in a supervisory role or not, lawyers and paralegals have to make difficult decisions every day, after carefully weighing the facts, benefits and consequences. Most of the time there are no negative repercussions, but one rash choice can upset a case or a client — and even undermine your legal career objective to move into a leadership position.

- Good judgment requires exercising your best problem-solving abilities. The bigger the potential risk, the more important it is that you take your time and weigh the options.
- As you develop this skill, it’s critical to seek the input of more experienced legal professionals. Talk to your boss or [mentor](#) about your choices and how you arrived at your decision, and ask them for feedback.

Pro tip: Cite examples of how you’ve exercised good judgment in your legal jobs on [your resume](#) and in your job interview.

2. Collaboration skills

As you advance in your legal career, you will find yourself working on larger teams juggling increasingly complex projects and cases. Collaboration is essential if you are to succeed working with colleagues and clients of diverse styles, education and experience levels.

- [It begins with communication, an essential component of](#) any successful team project. Try this: at the beginning of your next meeting, if given the chance to take a leadership role, brainstorm various approaches for tackling the case and make sure everyone knows their tasks.
- Then, during follow-ups, speak up about your own progress and challenges, and listen to others' stories and pitch in where you can to help your colleagues overcome obstacles. Lone wolves may be able to go fast, unencumbered by the pack, but a team can go further and get more done.

Pro tip: In your cover letter and in conversations with prospective employers, highlight projects for which you've exercised collaboration and the result it led to.

3. High ethical standards

Enjoying a long and successful legal career depends on your ability to demonstrate ethical behavior. Failing to adhere to ethical standards could compromise a legal professional's ability to gain the trust of his or her colleagues and clients, and a lawyer could be disciplined and disbarred for lying or damaging the integrity of the client-lawyer relationship.

Your personal moral standards may not be tested that often if your firm or legal department adheres to a strong ethical framework and provides robust oversight. However, it does not pay to be lax. Avoid mistakes and be very familiar with best practices.

- The American Bar Association's [Model Rules of Professional Conduct is an essential resource detailing a lawyer's responsibilities](#).
- Discuss ethical decisions with your manager and team as they arise, ensure that you and your legal colleagues adhere to best practices and take additional training when possible, such as [free CLE courses](#).

Pro tip: In your job application and interview, cite projects for which you've demonstrated high ethical standards in past roles, and the outcome.

4. Diplomacy

Another leadership attribute necessary for moving up in your legal career is diplomacy. By diplomacy, we mean tact, discretion, civility and thoughtfulness in managing professional relationships. Diplomacy requires careful handling of clients and projecting a professional image when dealing with third parties, as well as being respectful of colleagues.

- A diplomatic approach isn't something that develops overnight. It's a lifelong learning process. And not every lawyer has the knack for it. Just read the daily newspaper for stories of tact turned on its head.
- In law practice, diplomacy means managing differences, disagreements and conflicts. It's the fine-tuned art of [working as part of a team](#), as well as demonstrating compassion, patience and integrity.
- In all your legal jobs and interactions, strive for a win-win situation. Be polite and friendly, and keep your cool under pressure.

Pro tip: Choose professional job references who will champion your diplomatic skills.

To move up in your legal career, you need more than book smarts and technical abilities; you should also possess the key traits of a leader. You've heard about dressing for the legal jobs you want. To make it to the top of your profession, perform like the leader you aspire to become.

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Robert Half Legal, 2884 Sand Hill Road, Menlo Park, CA 94025, 1-800-870-8367, www.roberthalflegal.com

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