

Intro:

This is Michael Cowen and welcome to Trial Lawyer Nation.

Intro:

You are the leader in the courtroom, and you want the jury to be looking to you for the answers.

Intro:

When you figure out your theory, never deviate.

Intro:

You want the facts to be consistent, complete, and credible.

Intro:

The defense has no problem running out. The clock delay is the friend of the defense.

Intro:

It's tough to grow a firm by trying to hold on and micromanage.

Intro:

You've got to front load, a simple structure for jurors to be able to hold onto.

Intro:

What types of creative things can we do as lawyers, even though we don't have a trial setting?

Intro:

Whatever you've got to do to make it real, you've got to do to make it real. But the person who needs convincing is you.

Intro:

Welcome to the award-winning podcast, Trial Lawyer Nation, your source to win bigger verdicts, get more cases and manage your law firm. And now here's your host noteworthy author, sought after speaker, and renowned trial lawyer. Michael Cowen.

Michael Cowen:

Today on trial lawyer nation. I have Bill Biggs. Bill works with law firms to help their culture in leadership and help them really excel and thrive in today's world. Bill, how are you doing today?

Bill Biggs:

I'm doing great. Michael, how are you?

Michael Cowen:

I'm doing wonderful. Just turned 52 yesterday, had a wonderful day getting ready to have another wonderful year, another good trip around the sun, so.

Bill Biggs:

Well, congrats.

Michael Cowen:

Thanks. So tell me a little bit about yourself and what you do to help lawyers.

Bill Biggs:

So about 12 years ago, I got into the industry. I was actually a pastor for 10 years and have been in organizational leadership for most of my life, most of my professional life. And I just love culture. I love teams. I love the idea of coaching played sports in high school. And I just believe that in today's law firms, we see so often that, culture's going to happen one way or the other. It's just a question of whether or not that culture and that leadership environment is what you want.

Bill Biggs:

And so what I do for firms is I help them design their culture. I help them grow their leaders and grow their leadership team and their leadership structure, we design out their leadership structure. And I help them get what they want, which is usually more profitability and opportunity to have a team that loves them and loves the work. We create what I call true believers, a team full of people who have ownership mentality, and believe in the work that we do, are passionate about it, and are there for more than a paycheck. Usually when you create those things and help develop those things, law firm owners are pretty happy with the result and makes them proud of their firm. And I enjoy seeing that.

Michael Cowen:

So what is culture?

Bill Biggs:

Yeah, that's a great question. In fact, I think it is one of the most overused terms throughout corporate America and least understood. A lot of people try to define culture as, just being nice or the fun stuff about your office environment. And I was actually asked a question by the folks at Litify for a conference two years ago, asked the question of, can you create a talk that talks about how culture can actually increase your ROI, can make you more profitable, a larger return on investment.

Bill Biggs:

And so I really dug into this definition and I looked at it from a socio anthropological view. And really when you look at it that way, think about the way we look at culture across the world. It's about people groups, and it's about their values. It's about a common language. It's about their accepted traditions and norms. It's about how they interact with one another. It's about what's okay, and what's not within the culture, or within that people group.

Bill Biggs:

And so when we take that idea, that culture really is everything. It's everything about what we believe about how we talk with one another about what the accepted norms and traditions are and rituals within the environment. When we think about culture like that in the corporate context, in a law firm context and say, "It's really everything. It's what we believe about the work we do. It's our core values. It's the way we talk to one another, our common language. It's how we treat our clients, what we believe

about our clients. And it's what we believe about how we treat one another." That stuff becomes powerful. We begin to dig into it and it helps transform organizations.

Bill Biggs:

So a short version, I know that was a long answer, a short succinct answer to your question, what is culture? Well, culture is everything.

Michael Cowen:

So what are some issues you see? Law firms tend to be smaller organizations at these plaintiffs firms tend to be not as huge, there's a few exceptions. But what are some issues you see with law firm culture?

Bill Biggs:

So I think most people start out. Most owners, entrepreneurial lawyers, they start out their firms with very good intentions and they want good things. But I think one of the big issues is, they're not intentional enough. They don't realize that leadership and culture must be designed. That the way it just unfolds, usually isn't what you want it be. And so I think number one is the intentionality piece is often missing because it's just not something that we're taught. And it's definitely not something that's taught in law school. So I think that's one big piece.

Bill Biggs:

I think another piece is, and these go together, right? These are all connected. I think a lack of understanding of the creation of a leadership structure and scaling what I would call scaling with leadership. In other words, mapping out and designing that as we grow from one person to five people, to 10 people, to 20, to 40 to 50, as we grow we need to already be ahead of the game in terms of what our leadership team, what our leadership structure is going to look like.

Bill Biggs:

For instance, it's uncanny, how often I see this, and some other guys in the industry that do some of the similar things or think similar, have similar questions, observe similar things. Chad Dudley is a good example, he and I talk a lot about this. Usually at about 20 to 30 people, a law firm has been run and been led by force of personality by the owner of the partners. But when it reaches that number, it gets a little chaotic. It gets a little squirly and out of hand.

Bill Biggs:

Well, why? Because that person, or even those two people, or a handful of people, partners, they don't know how to manage that number. And they don't know everybody as well. And their personality doesn't saturate the culture as much because the culture's expanding, the footprint's expanding. So I get a lot of calls at firms that are at 20 or 30, they're in a tough situation because they haven't prepared for their leadership needs.

Michael Cowen:

Yeah. And I think that's really what I was aiming at. The last question is, what are the problems, the tough situations people get when they're not intentional about culture and leadership, and it just kind of happens and not necessarily the way they want it to happen?

Bill Biggs:

Yeah. So I think a couple of things that happen there often is that they get people, and I call these C players. If you were to... There's a great grid, Simon Sinek, I believe he was one of the originators of this idea. A grid of the B, C and D player. Well, the C player on that grid is someone who's actually a high performer. They do their job well, but culturally they're toxic. They are a low performer when it comes to culture. And I think a lot of firms, a lot of businesses in general, hold onto those people because the performance is high. They're making fees. They're good at what they do, and yet they're toxic to the people around them. And over time, sometimes quickly, they will erode the entire culture. And the end result of the organization will be worse than what it started with.

Bill Biggs:

And the leader, the partner, the owner has held onto that person because all they can say, "Wow, they're good at trial. They're a good lawyer. They're good at what they do. They're a high performer." But they're bringing everybody else down. So whether that's because they're a gossip, they bring around drama. They're toxic to people. They're offensive. They bring down the whole organization and yet they themselves are a strong performer. So it's hard to get rid of them. It's hard to say, "We've got to move this person on." When really, if you don't do that, it's like having a cancer in your body. You've got to get rid of it.

Bill Biggs:

So I think that's one of the issues that happens a lot when culture isn't intentional, when people haven't designed it. I also think that you also see issues with, as we mentioned, or as I said earlier, drama and gossip become a big thing. Look, most firms, most businesses fail, not because of bad business ideas, but because of internal fracture and interpersonal issues. People can't get along, people have a hard time getting along. And look, you can look all around us, we've got folks that are having all kinds of issues, emotional issues. Having a hard time getting along with each other, they bring that into their workplace. It doesn't stop at the door. And if you don't have a design for that, if you haven't hired to prevent that and to bring in the people that you really want, you're going to have interpersonal problems and it's probably going to tear down the firm. Or at least hold it back.

Michael Cowen:

Yeah, I've been through a lot of that in my career unfortunately. Before I've learned, and I'm not perfect at it, but before I've learned to become a lot more intentional. So what are some of the things people can do to be intentional about their culture?

Bill Biggs:

Yeah, well, I think, and this is not a plug for me at all, or for Vista, which is a great organization I consult with, Tim Mackie and that team. I think sometimes people need to bring in a leadership consultant of some kind, or even if it's another firm that they admire, go and visit that firm. If you see it's working somewhere, go and learn.

Bill Biggs:

So I think one of the things about intentionality is to say, "I'm the problem. I'm the leader." I like to say every problem is a leadership problem. If you sense that there's a leadership deficit in your organization, then you've got to be the person to step up and to do something about it. So you go and get the expert help, you go and see somebody who's doing it right and you learn what they do, right. Tim Mackie says

this, "Rip off and duplicate." Right. RNG is not research and development. It's rip off and duplicate, see it done right, and go and learn how to do it yourself.

Bill Biggs:

So that's one thing. I think very tangibly, another thing is start with the hiring process, start with who you're bringing onto the team and be very thoughtful. And again, intentional about how you want to build your team and what type of people. Not just somebody who can do the job, that's probably going to be a problem later on. You're going to regret that you didn't put more effort into screening people.

Bill Biggs:

I created something called the shadow process where in an organization, every candidate comes in and once they meet a certain stage, they meet with five different people on the team. And those five different people on the team get to spend 30 or 45 minutes each with the candidate. And then those four or five people on the team get to have a vote and independent vote about whether or not that person should be brought on the team. And if it's not unanimous, then I don't hire him. And so that gives buy-in right. And that could be an attorney who's coming in, and a big trial lawyer who's coming in to interview for a position and a firm, but the receptionist gets a real bad vibe from him or her. And they say, "No." Well then they're not hired.

Bill Biggs:

And the team rallies around that, they love that because they now feel like they have a say in who they work with. And they have a responsibility and a privilege to help create their own team. And it works wonders for helping culture. So that's a practical piece, the coaching, the practical piece.

Bill Biggs:

And then the third thing that I would say that's practical, but it's harder to do than it sounds is to take a step back and to say, what is our purpose? Why do we exist? And to go through this process of creating a purpose statement for your firm, what you're really about, and then also to create core values. Again, another buzzword that's way overused, but the heart of the matter is still very good. Core values are absolutely needed in a firm, because if you don't know who you are, then you don't know how to communicate that to the rest of your team. And they don't know who they're and the identity of the firm gets deleted over time.

Michael Cowen:

I will tell you that works so well. We've been working on this for two or three years. Time starts compressing, but we start every, and it feels silly, but I'm still doing it. We start every single meeting every single morning, with our purpose, our three core values and our three strategies for success.

Bill Biggs:

Love it, love it.

Michael Cowen:

Every time. And it really does make a difference. Because then when you go back and you look at making a decision sometimes like, Ooh, do we take this case or not? Well, what are our core values? What are our... Does this fit in with who we are and what we're doing, what our plans are?

Bill Biggs:

I love that Michael, I call that alignment. You're aligned, right? I mean that your decision making's aligned, your people are aligned. And that happens because you know your core values and your reinforcing them. What you brought up was so good. Reinforcing them at every opportunity.

Michael Cowen:

I do have a question. I want to circle back. You talked about having your five people, the people go and they have to interview with five people, the five people, I don't know if it has to be five, but a number of people.

Bill Biggs:

Right. Sure.

Michael Cowen:

What do you say to people say, "Well, look in today's environment, you can't interview... Someone will get another job by the time you put them through that whole process. That it's too competitive trying to hire people. There's a worker shortage. You just can't do that nowadays."

Bill Biggs:

Yeah. It's great. Great question. And I have run across that and been asked that question. Look, I think you need to streamline that process as much as possible, and there's a way to do it. In other words, if you have the ability to get that person on a zoom or even bring them in for an interview, normally then you can get it lined up so that you can get at least three to four people back to back to back on a zoom call, or in an interview. In other words, what I'm saying is this can be knocked out in a few hours.

Bill Biggs:

My whole idea of the shadow process can be done in a day, can be done in a reasonably short amount of time. Now it takes coordination. It takes coordination and availability on the part of your team. And I won't go into all the details here because it can get into some minutia, but it's very doable. And what I would say is, even though it takes some coordination, the end result is so much better and saves you so much time to do it right the first time. So you don't do it over and over and over again because you got the wrong person, that it's well worth it.

Michael Cowen:

I will tell you that we, because of frustration, because of perceived worker shortage, I allowed someone to make a hire for me without me even meeting the person first or interviewing and without going through the entire process. Because I was told, well, this person has another job offer. If we don't act quick I think we're going to lose her, this is a good candidate. And it was clear from her first day at work that this wasn't going to work. And it just, she was crazier and crazier as time went on until a month or two later, we were right back where we were on the drawing board. If we had... If she wasn't-

Bill Biggs:

Had done it right the first time.

Michael Cowen:

If we just done it right the, yeah, we would've lost out on this person, but this person turned out to be an incredibly toxic candidate. Anyway, that snuck through because we didn't go through the full process.

Bill Biggs:

Absolutely. And to those who say, "Ah, I can't waste time. I've got to hire them because there's a hiring shortage and..." Well, think about every one of them has probably experienced what you said. We made a bad hire because we were in a rush. We had her for a month. We had her for three weeks, or worse yet we had her for six months. We had him for a year because we were unwilling because we were so stressed or overwhelmed with need that we wouldn't get rid of the person. Now they're that C player, that culture problem. But here's the thing. Think about all the time that you missed out looking for the right person, because you thought you had them. And so you worry about, oh, we got to give an offer quick. Well, you hire the person. And as you do that, all those other people that could been the right person, they're now not getting interviewed. They're not going through your process because you already made hire. So do it right the first time.

Michael Cowen:

And frankly, there's always a shortage of great employees, no matter what the economy is, because really, truly the truly great people aren't looking around a whole lot. They're really hard to find. And so no matter what you're going to have to go screen through a lot. We, after that, went back and said, "We are not going to ever skip a step again."

Bill Biggs:

Yep. And to your point there, there's always a shortage. That is why. And look, this culture thing is not easy, and it's also a long play. It doesn't happen instantaneously. But to the point that you just made, that's why we want to create an architect of phenomenal culture. Because when we do, we'll attract those A players. People will want to come work for us and we won't have to go out and dig them up and find them in other places and poach them or whatever. Or just hope that they're going to be available when we have a need. Nope. They'll want to come work. They'll know that we are one of the best places to work in town or in America. And they'll seek us out, which is a huge benefit for recruiting.

Michael Cowen:

Yeah. I think another huge benefit for culture is it allows you to recruit for aptitude and develop the skills internally. In other words, find people that have the right attitude, the right skill, the right abilities, but maybe not have any experience in the industry.

Bill Biggs:

Wow, Michael, you and I are so on the same wavelength. I'm excited to talk more, even offline about this. I have said for years, I don't really care that much about experience. I mean, there are some, there's some areas and some things where you do need experience, but I want attitude and aptitude all day long. You give me somebody who's going to be a great culture fit and they're intelligent and I'll turn them in... And they have want to, they want to be a part of what we do. They have the makings of being a true believer with what we do and being passionate about what we do. Hey, we can turn them into an A player. We can give them the skills and the experience. I would take that any day over somebody who's questionable in culture that has a lot of experience in the industry.

Michael Cowen:

One thing I've found is sometimes when we hire people with a lot of experience, it's actually worse because in my... I don't know if you found this, but I've found that most law firms are dysfunctional. Plaintiff, defense, big, small. When I worked at a 200 lawyer office in New York city at a big wall street firm down to a one lawyer office in Brownsville, Texas, I found just pretty universal dysfunction. And so it's almost having to unlearn other people's bad habits are... Well, the other lawyer used to work for, wanted this done this way, I want to do it that way because that's how I know how to do it. Not the way y'all do it. And it's a one year process with either they either buy in or they get out. Have you had any experience with that?

Bill Biggs:

100%. Again, we're very aligned on that idea and that perspective. Yes. And look, I liken it, I'm a big sports fan. So I liken it to, when you bring a veteran player onto another team. A big piece of that is that veteran player going to bring the right stuff, the right culture? Are they going to be able to mesh with what the coach is wanting to do with the vision of the team, the purpose of the team, the existing teamwork and leadership and chemistry. And if they're not, that veteran has a potential, especially if they came from a dysfunctional place. And as you said, a lot of firms are dysfunctional. Or it may not be that they're all the way to what I would call dysfunctional, but they're just kind of neutral, which they're just kind of blah. Once a person has been in that environment and they come into a new environment, that's vibrant, that emphasizes culture, they can be a detractors, and it can be a big setback.

Bill Biggs:

So I agree with you, the firms that I've worked with and the firms that I've helped build, I prefer building on attitude, aptitude, want to, true believers, even people who haven't been in the industry, or even people who haven't practiced the type of law that we're doing, but they want it. It takes a little longer and you do need experience in certain positions, for sure. But in general, I'm not averse at all, in fact, I'm favorable to hiring what I would call young. And that doesn't mean chronological age necessarily. That means experience.

Michael Cowen:

Yeah. We have totally gone to that too. Leadership, how does a firm, especially when you're going from, I'm doing everything myself, I've got three or four people working for me, to now I'm getting bigger and I need help. How does a firm design its leadership structure?

Bill Biggs:

Yeah. So that's a great question. I think again, number one, you look at other firms that are doing it right. You get ideas, you reach out to experts who have done this stuff. But just in a few quick sound bite hits here. I think one of the things, when you're transitioning from the owner being the primary leader to realizing they need to bring in other leaders or create them, is start with creation of a leadership team or an executive team. And you figure out who you want on that team and why you want them there and whether or not that can scale.

Bill Biggs:

Then I think the next step is to very intentionally think about a mid... People call it a mid management layer. I'm not a fan of the term management because I do think language matters. Processes and systems are manage, people are led. So I call it a mid leadership level. And that usually means folks who are going

to end up starting out with three or four direct reports. So maybe that's your case managers, or your paralegals, or maybe it's an attorney team lead.

Bill Biggs:

But you add these layers first, and I work from the top down. I believe that you add your top layer, you get your leadership right at the highest level first. You prioritize that. And that means you. That means then your executive team around you, or you can just call it your leadership team if you're not ready to call in an executive team. And then as you grow and grow, probably by the time you're at that 30 to 40 member mark, you probably need a mid-level leadership team as well. And then, well, and I won't say and then, this should have been designed and thought about as these things were being built. You've got to have a plan for how you're going to grow these folks.

Bill Biggs:

Leadership just doesn't happen, right? It doesn't just naturally people, oh, well they're... It's working. Most of the time it has to be by design. And so you need to be thinking about how I'm going to develop my leaders, whether that's through a meeting structure, whether that's through professional development, through conferences, through book reading.

Bill Biggs:

In my systems and what we do with Vista, I want to see a weekly or at least biweekly leadership meeting at the various levels. And I want a piece of that leadership meeting every week or every two weeks to be professional development. We're reading through a book together. We're watching a seven minute Ted talk and discussing it. We're talking through issues so that people can see how I'm thinking about them and how I want us to process and decision make. That leadership development piece at every level is often missed. And people just have meetings. Organizations, firms will have meetings just to solve problems and that's it. Well at the end of the day, you're not developing your leaders. They're not growing. And if you don't have some that just by chance happen to be natural at leadership, then you're going to have a leadership deficit over time.

Michael Cowen:

And so when we're putting our leadership teams together, I know this is an issue I've evolved in. I just wanted to hear your take. Do you recommend that a law firm specifically only have lawyers on their leadership team or that they include non-lawyers on their leadership team?

Bill Biggs:

I would always recommend that it'd be a mix. And I think a case can be made for various different structures. It can look differently. There's not just one way. But I think most firms need leadership that comes from both the lawyer space and the non-lawyer space.

Bill Biggs:

The reason I would say that is, at least in the firms that I've seen, that it functioned the highest. I believe that you want your lawyers to spend most of their time lawyering. You hire them with a very specific skill in mind. You want them to be freed up to do what they do best. And there's nothing about being a lawyer that automatically equips you to be a leader or vice versa. And there's nothing about being a non-lawyer... Either way. I think you need people at every level. So I wouldn't have naturally, I wouldn't have a lawyer leading paralegals. I would a paralegal team lead. I think that's a better structure. I don't

you need your account team and your finance team lead by a lawyer, I think you need a financial person. So I think you play to the skill sets and what's needed.

Bill Biggs:

And look, firms are more and more. I'm not saying it can't be done the other way, but firms across America that I see that are the most successful, they are operated, they are approached as businesses and organizations, not just as law firms.

Michael Cowen:

Well, I will tell you, we used to just have the three lawyers with their name on the door, and then we'd meet every quarter and without non-lawyers in the group. And what I found is we would spend an hour, two hours trying to solve a problem. Then we'd go back to operations manager and found out that problem had no longer exists, and had worked out a month or two before. But we were just trying to go from memory what we thought the issues were without involving the people that were in the trenches on some of those issues.

Michael Cowen:

So it was not only a great waste of time, but not getting the same amount of buy in. Whereas when we added our operations manager and used to be our marketing director when we had one, to the leadership team we got a lot more actionable intelligence from what was going on on a day to day basis. We got a lot more buy-in and frankly, we got a lot of great ideas and some good discernment. Sometimes I come up with ideas that aren't going to work in the real world and having people that can explain to me why this won't work is sometimes really important.

Bill Biggs:

Absolutely. Again, I think the issue that you're touching on has to do with the different layers of leadership and who is where. You might be, it might be that you have a partners meeting, you have three partners that started the firm, and there may be a level to the organization where it's just the three of the partners that are making very, very, very high level vision related directional decisions. But I think in every firm, there needs to be an executive or high level leadership team where there is representation from the major departments in the firm, of the leadership of the major departments of the firm. And so often, especially in larger firms, a lot of those folks are not going to be lawyers.

Michael Cowen:

Something else I tried... And I've tried a lot of things that didn't work over the years. And one thing I tried that didn't work is I said, "Okay, I know that frankly management is not my strong point." I mean, I'm a lot better at being a lawyer than being a manager. And so I would try just hiring a manager and telling people, "I suck at management, the manager's going to manage, I'm going to lawyer." And it always turned into a toxic soup within three years when I did that. When I was not actively involved. Do you have any idea why that would be?

Bill Biggs:

I would say the first thing that I would look into is were you and that manager where you guys fully aligned? In other words, did they know exactly what you wanted out the firm? And I think that's critical for this to work well. For this model where you have lawyers, non lawyers, you have professional leaders, whether that be a COO or a CEO or whatever you want to call, managers. If you're going to have those

roles, but yet you started the firm and it's your firm, it's your vision for the firm. Then there has to be a lot of alignment there between you or all the partners and this leadership or leader that you are empowering.

Bill Biggs:

If that's there and you know that they are, they're not going to always make every decision the way you would do it. And in fact, that's good because you hired them to use their expertise. But I think that alignment has to be there. I've seen it work incredibly well in some places. And I've also seen it as you say, kind of erode and become toxic. But when I see that, and I hear that, my first thought is, is there alignment between those core people?

Michael Cowen:

Yeah, what I've found is no matter how much I'm going to let the COO or operations manager do the day to day managing, I still have to meet with them and give guidance and share a vision. And I finally just... It was some book I read by Patrick Lenciono, I think some temptations of a CEO or something, but I think I finally... Occurred to me if I want to run my own business, then there's, own my own business, there's certain things I just have to do. And providing the high level guidance cultural leadership is part of it. And if I don't want to do that, then I need to go work for someone else. I can't just wish it into existence. I have to put the work in.

Bill Biggs:

That's right. That's right. I mean, it's your influence and it's your organization. Unless you're okay with it becoming what that other person also envisions it to be. Then you need to have your influence there, or... Your vision is not going to be manifested if you're not having influence on the direction.

Ad:

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Michael Cowen:

So here's something I'm strongly going to ask for some free advice here because I'm personally struggling with this. How do we develop our mid-level leaders?

Bill Biggs:

Something that I really love. I think that the reason I love it is seeing mid-level leaders developed, gives them a career path. It gives them a sense of ownership in the firm and meaning and purpose. When you take someone who has been a great team member, a great soldier, they've got leadership ability, you elevate them, you pour into them, you're really giving someone a huge gift. And I think it's what we're called to. I think it's part of what we've got to do in organizations for our own health. I also think it's fantastic for that person, or for that group of people.

Bill Biggs:

So I think what you do is you identify. You don't just look and say, "Oh well, who's the paralegal that's done the very best job, the highest performer." The old adage, right of, great salesperson doesn't necessarily make a great sales manager. And I think that is very sage, very wise advice. Now they've got to have credibility in their domain. They've got to be good at what they do. And other people have to trust them and have to believe that they can speak well enough into the content, into the domain of what they're doing. That they have that credibility. But you've got to look for leadership abilities.

Bill Biggs:

There's got to be a way to, and there is a way to find who are your leaders that you can pour into. And then you being to pull them, you elevate them and you begin to bring them in and you create a mid level leadership team meeting. And even if you haven't, right, you're pulling them in and you're beginning to talk to them about where you see the firm going. And well, now we have seven paralegals. We feel like we need to have a paralegal team lead. And Mary, you have shown a great deal of aptitude. We would like to talk to you more about this and here's our thoughts.

Bill Biggs:

So you start creating that once a week or once every two week meeting, you start talking about the needs of those seven paralegals, how we can lead them well. What are the issues they're facing? How can we equip them to do their jobs better? What are some processes and systems we can improve? Mary, I want you to start being intentional with caring for these seven people. Do you believe you've got it in you to become a leader and not just a coworker and not just a friend? I want you to know their kids. I want their kids names. I want you to know what's going on in their lives so that you can really care for them, so that you can really love them and that you can demand high performance of them.

Bill Biggs:

I think that process of creating that mid-level leadership, it's not rocket science. It's again about intentionality, about identifying talent, and then begin to nurture that talent. Then you name them, you say, "Now Maria's our paralegal team lead." Everybody knows it. It's declared, it's defined. And now she's a part of that level. She's a part of that group. And every week or every other week, she is meeting with other leaders. They're sharing issues in their departments. They're sharing about the processes. They're sharing about people. They're looking at ways to get better. And they're hearing from, this is where I think a COO or a CEO, or someone who has an executive presence in the firm, you might call him your operations manager, director of ops, whatever. They should be leading that meeting, and they should be capable of pouring into and creating more leaders.

Bill Biggs:

One of the best books on leadership out there in my opinion is Multipliers by Liz Wiseman. Every great COO, director of ops, CEO, they need to be a multiplier. And that's what you're doing with mid level leaders. You're observing their aptitude, pulling them up. And then you're multiplying them into higher leadership.

Michael Cowen:

I got a flight to Europe coming up this weekend. So I'm going to definitely get that book and-

Bill Biggs:

Yeah, it's great. Fantastic.

Michael Cowen:

So you had a couple words in there that have been a real struggle of mine. You talked about both loving your people and demanding high performance and I'm really a lot better at loving my people than I am in demanding high performance. I always feel guilty about, I've been getting better at it. But it's... Why are they both important and how do you do it?

Bill Biggs:

Yeah. Great, phenomenal question. In fact, I kind of built my career on this idea, and I think both are critical and we all lean one way or the other, more so. And so we've got to be balanced at them.

Bill Biggs:

Why are they both important? Well, I think the love people part that depends on your value system and kind of your worldview, how you see life, and the world, and people. For me, I just believe people are valuable. I believe in human worth. And I enjoy, it's taken me a long time to really feel like, yes, I can stake my claim here and say this. And it is right, even in the business world. I want to create more than just a profitable business. That for me, I want to create a team of people that I am a part of making their lives better. And they are a part of making our clients' lives better. That's important to me.

Bill Biggs:

Profitability is as well, now I want to be ultra profitable. And so I think the loving people element has to be based in what you believe about people and you got to care for them and look by the way, both of these things. And I won't go into again, the minutiae of it, but it starts with hiring. You got to think this way and design your hiring systems right. So that, I always say this, so that you can love and demand high performance. Because if you don't have the right people, I learned this from Nick Saban. He recruits people to his team, right, that will respond to his leadership style. And I think that some people naturally do that, but that's a brilliant thing to think through, right? To give heed to. Recruit people onto your team that will respond to your leadership style. So for me, that means I need people that they will respond to genuine care, but they also want to win. And they don't mind being coached. So that hiring piece and getting the right folks is a critical piece.

Bill Biggs:

So you love them because of their inherent worth. And because you want to create a really awesome environment, you want to create where people love what they do, where they come to work and enjoy it. Right. I think that makes for the best, that's more fun. And I think it leads to more success. The flip side is the high performance. I believe when you love people, well, you earn the right to demand high performance. Again, if you've chosen the right people who are responsive to that style. So demand high performance, it's just like a coach, right? Every great coach, their players look back. And when you hear them, year after year, you hear their players say, "Yeah, I know coach so and so, he really cared about, he was hard on us. He wanted excellence. He wanted perfection, but he cared about us. He loved us."

Bill Biggs:

So a great coach not only wants to develop the potential of every one of his team members or her team members, whether that be the first stringer or the third stringer. But they also are aware of talent and they also want to win a championship. They want to be the best, they're highly competitive. And so they're not going to put the third stringer in a first stringer role. And sometimes they have to make the difficult decision to cut a player. When the player is not in alignment is not going to be able to be high

performing on their team. That's a tough decision and it may not feel like a loving decision, but it has to be made if a championship is going to be won. And at the end of the day, it's probably best for that player as well.

Bill Biggs:

So I think it is that balance. I do like the coaching analogy. It fits to me, that you can do both. But it takes somebody who's naturally inclined to want to care for people, but is also naturally inclined to compete and to win and understands what that means. I don't know how you can be a really effective leader if you don't have some element of both of those in you.

Michael Cowen:

And I've noticed that coaching is very different than teaching. I'm a really good teacher, I can sit there and explain something so someone can understand what I'm talking about, like giving a lecture. But coaching is letting them try it and then having the patience to, no, do it this way. No, you didn't do this right, go do it this way. Does not come naturally to me. I mean, how does one either develop in themselves or find people that have that skillset?

Bill Biggs:

Yeah. Well, I think that's a phenomenal observation on your part, that there is a difference there. Yeah. I think that it can be developed. I think that coaching skill can be developed. You begin to realize what the differences are.

Bill Biggs:

One of the first steps that I see in leaders, whether they were a great leader to start with and they had natural ability, or they grew into that role, which almost everybody has to grow into it to some degree, is self-awareness. A recognition that I need to study this, I need to look for mentors, I need to look for examples, I need to look for expertise in this realm. I need to read books, watch Ted talk, go to conferences, have good conversations with people who are doing it better than I am. That humility of saying, I need this help. I want to get better is, for me kind of square one on that.

Bill Biggs:

Once you do that, I think you start to realize where your gaps are. And I think most intelligent, well intentioned people that have made it to that level already have the ability to grow into their gaps. And I think all of us have to do that to some degree. If you can, if you realize, look, I am just wired a certain way, or I just don't want to do this. This isn't the role that I want to play in my organization. Then you begin to look for people who are capable of that and who have had that ability.

Bill Biggs:

Look, I've seen a lot, a lot of law firms, of course, hire non-lawyer COO's. I've seen a lot of COO's that have been hired from outside industries where really they had leadership ability. They were healthy and successful leaders and they were then just brought into the legal space and they learned our industry. I think that model can absolutely work.

Bill Biggs:

On the flip side. I've also seen some really healthy COO's, successful COO's that were lawyers that had natural leadership ability. And honestly, weren't that great a lawyer, maybe they weren't the best lawyer, they weren't best trial guy or gal around. And really they were more wired to a COO or a CEO rather than to practice law. And that's a huge benefit when a firm needs that. So if you don't have it, if you're not willing to develop it, or you don't want to be in that role in your firm, then I think you've got to go out and find it, and you've got to look in places where leaders are found not just where legalist specialists are found.

Michael Cowen:

I agree a hundred percent. Another, you and I talked some before we started. And another thing you said was every problem is a leadership problem. That really strikes me. I think maybe it was Tim Mackey, somebody told me once that everything that goes wrong at your law firm is there either because you are permitting it or because you're encouraging it. One or the other.

Bill Biggs:

Yeah, you either coached it or you allowed it.

Michael Cowen:

Yeah. So tell me a little bit more about every problem being a leadership problem.

Bill Biggs:

Yeah, so again, these are things that over the years that I've just kind of thought about a lot and come to, again, stake my claim and say, "Look, I think this is true." I'm going to say this one pretty strongly. And at the end of the day, look, it's the same way I feel about my family. It's the same way I feel about a team it's the same way I'm going to feel about my business or about my law firm. What goes on there and how it develops and its level of success is on me. I'm the leader. If I own it, if I started, if I'm the person whose responsible for it, then I'm responsible. I'm the one has to make those decisions. And I think this comes down a lot to this idea of taking fully on an ownership mentality and not being a victim, not being a victim.

Bill Biggs:

I do hear a lot of leaders, a lot of owners who complain about their teams a lot. Oh, well this person and they're lazy and they're kind of frustrating. And I always gently want to move them to a place of, stop blaming your team. Now you've got to correctly identify the issues on your team, but if you're a blamer by nature and you're pointing to everybody else, that's a problem. And that means that you're not taking on the responsibility. Or you think the solution is just to constantly fire people, you're constantly unhappy and disappointed with your people. That's another warning sign that the problem is you.

Bill Biggs:

Every problem is a leadership problem simply means that were the ones who have to find a way. And great leaders, a way to win. They solve problems, they're very self-aware, they understand their own weaknesses, their own strengths. And they are willing to do whatever is necessary and healthy to help their organization, to propel their organization to success. They do not blame. They see things as clearly as possible and they try to work out the bias. And they're a problem solver and they're a visionary. And they take it on themselves to do what's necessary to get things fixed. I think that's a huge, huge, huge quality that's necessary in a leader.

Michael Cowen:

So I want to, I'm going to ask this question two parts. Part one is if someone owns a law firm and they want get better as a leader, they want to improve their culture. They want to create a leadership team. What are some resources that you could point them to, to learn how to do that?

Bill Biggs:

Yeah, so I think more and more in our industry, and this is in the plaintiff's industry, but this goes, leadership is not unique to plaintiff's firms. And so I think this stuff is available to people, to folks from any practice area, any side of the aisle, so to speak in the legal industry. There are organizations out there now and coaches and consulting firms. There are consortiums, there are groups that get together. Some of the Vista BP&I group Best Practices and Innovation. It's a gathering of law firm leaders to talk about, a small group of people to talk about what's going on in their firm. PILMMA with Ken Hardinson, they do a similar thing with their mastermind groups. I know Mike Morrison Fireproof, they do a similar thing.

Bill Biggs:

All of these organizations that I just mentioned also offer conferences where you can go and learn about, I mean, I'm leaving today to go to PILMMA in new Orleans. There's going to be thousands of people there. And I'm going to give this talk on every problem as a leadership problem. There are resources out there for those things. There are also direct coaches. I'm a big fan of a guy named Andy Bailey with Petra Coaching. There are corporate coaches. I do coaching. Tim does coaching. I think Chad Dudley does some coaching. Mike Morris does coaching. There are resources out there in our industry and across practice area lines that if you want to just grow your leadership, you can do it. And by the way, those are just resources within the industry. That's not to mention all the great stuff that's out there that is... Leadership is a transcendent skill it's not unique to our niche. So you've got folks out there like Simon Sinek and Liz Wiseman and Patrick Lenciono. I mean, on and on and on that are focusing on leadership. There are lots of resources.

Michael Cowen:

Second part of that question, because if a lot of our listeners are not law firm owners, or at least not law firm owners, yet. If someone's at a law firm, let's say one to 10 year lawyer, they're not in charge, but they both want to develop themselves as leaders within their firm. And also to try to, from within maybe not from the top, but encourage their leadership to improve their culture. What are some things that you'd recommend that people do?

Bill Biggs:

Love that question. So the first thing that I always tell an emerging leader, somebody who wants to be a leader or who sees the path unfolding ahead of them, is to really think through this concept of ownership mentality. I believe that our culture, meaning American popular culture and workplace culture over the years has developed an adversarial structure or positioning between individuals and the companies that they work for. And I think that's super unhealthy. In other words people are skeptical of the place they work for and the place they work for is skeptical of them and cautious. And there's a self protective environment that often develops and you got to get yours. And the companies, firms sometimes are abusing their people and people taking advantage of the firm, that stuff is very disheartening and saddening to me.

Bill Biggs:

At the end of the day, you got to be a part of a great organization, you're a team member. You want to make sure you're in a place as much as possible that is going to allow you to become, it's going to foster your potential. If that's there, then you need to embrace an ownership mentality. And what I mean by that is don't think like an employee, don't think like someone who's just trying to get the most you can out of this organization. Think about what it would be like to be the owner of this organization and take on that mentality. In other words, do everything you can to see that organization be successful. Even if it's not...

Bill Biggs:

I tell all my team members, whenever I've been a COO or, you see a piece of paper on the floor, you see a client in the foyer, that's not somebody else's client, that's not somebody else's piece of paper. That's yours. Go out there and greet that person, say hi, as you walk by, see if there's anything you can do to help them. Pick up the piece of paper on the floor, clean the toilets if they need to be clean. Do what it takes to help the whole organization move forward. That's what leaders do. And no matter what your title is. So take on an ownership mentality first, that is the absolute first start.

Bill Biggs:

And I would say, even if you're in an organization who doesn't give you, is not fostering your potential, I still believe you should take on an ownership mentality. Now it may mean that sooner or later, you need to take that to another organization. You need to take your skills somewhere else because the place you're at isn't fostering who you are. But I still think you should lead with an ownership mentality and function that way, because I think it's the right thing to do. And it's always going to make the people and the organization around you better, which is the hallmark of great leader. So first take on the ownership mentality, and then just like any other leader, start to get into these resources. Read these books, go out and get two books, Multipliers and Start With Why by Simon Sinek. Multipliers is Liz Wiseman. Read those two books, and you'll be well on your way to getting your heart and your mindset right about what it means to be a leader, regardless of whether you have the title yet.

Michael Cowen:

Bill, thank you. That is awesome. And I will tell you as a law firm owner, it is so great when you see people take on that ownership mentality and you see people come in with, Hey, here's a better way to do things. Hey, why can't... Even if sometimes someone says here's a better way to do things. And we have to say, "Well, we tried that before here. It didn't work." It still makes me happy to hear it because you care and you want to make it better. And it makes me want to think, how can I develop this person-

Bill Biggs:

That's it.

Michael Cowen:

And raise them up more.

Bill Biggs:

That's so right, Michael. And that's what I tell you when that ownership mentality talk that I give, I say, "Look, when owners see that in their people, good owners want to pour into that." They appreciate it

and they want a team full of those folks. So they're probably going to reinforce it with a reward and a lot of positive appreciation. So that's a win-win that's a great synergism when that happens.

Michael Cowen:

And unfortunately we're kind of hitting about the amount of time that one of these podcasts takes. But if someone wants to learn more from you or maybe even work for you, how can people find you?

Bill Biggs:

Well, you can go to Vista Consulting, just Google Vista Consulting. That's one way. I've got about eight jobs. That's one of them. But that's one way that you can find me. They're also more than welcome to reach out to me directly biggs.william@gmail.com. And you can also call me or text me (979) 219-1404. And lastly, if you wanted to check out my personal website, you can do that at biggs A-N-D, and biggsandassociates.com

Michael Cowen:

Bill, thank you so much. I look forward to talking with you more. We've really been hitting it off, both on this interview and before. And I hope everyone got something out of this and that you join us next time on Trial Lawyer Nation.

Outro:

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