

Maverick partners

Tactics for dealing with
difficult colleagues

Allies or aliens?

Tips for managing your
MP/FD relationship

Panel: Business mindset

How to become a trusted
adviser for high-value legal work

Funke Abimbola

'How I select law firms to
advise Roche Products (UK)'



JULIUS P. SMITH JR., CHAIR EMERITUS, WILLIAMS MULLEN

Use history to determine your areas of focus as managing partner

In the United States, newspapers focus on disputes over Confederate battle flags and license plates. At the Tower of London, guides tell ghoulish stories of ancient atrocities. New York City taxi drivers bemoan the closing of tunnels at 10:38am on September 11th to mark the anniversary of 9/11. What do all of these events have in common? They all highlight significant historic happenings. In today's world, people ignore, revere or relive history. Changing those patterns presents a bridge too far, but they do offer some valuable lessons for the managing partner. How does history affect the success or failure of a law firm?

National or international history rarely impacts a firm, neither does law firm history. Managing partners who spend time revering or reliving firm history add little to the success or failure of the firm. On the other hand, those managing partners who ignore history do so at their own peril. The history that requires their attention is not that of the firm, but of its individual lawyers. Every lawyer has his history or, better stated, his patterns or course of conduct. For example, lawyers either produce business or they don't. They work long hours or they don't. They play well together or they don't.

Managing partners, particularly new ones, often feel compelled to make a lawyer's future different from his past. While that is a noble goal, it rarely meets with success, either for the targeted lawyer or the firm. The good news and bad news about lawyers is that they rarely change. A 45-year-old lawyer who has never generated business will not suddenly become a rainmaker. A lawyer who consistently works 1,200 billable hours for 20 years will not miraculously work 2,000 hours. A failure at every leadership position will not overnight become Winston Churchill.

Putting resources and expectations into changing people's behavioral patterns rarely meets with success. Lip service will be given to change and promises will be made but, at the end of the day, the behavioral patterns will be the same.

The good news is that the managing partner knows what to expect from each of the firm's lawyers. Each lawyer will continue to act and work as they always have. Within a certain framework, the managing partner can move the needle a small amount. He can coax a few more hours out of a traditionally hardworking partner. He can ask for a little more business generation from someone who produces business. He can make people who want to lead into leaders. People get better, but they don't change.

To best understand this allocation of resources, imagine the classic bell curve. The firm's least-successful lawyers occupy the bottom left of the curve. At the bottom right reside the most successful lawyers. By natural inclination, a managing partner (again, particularly a new one) devotes resources and energy to the bottom left of the curve. 'Getting the mule out of the ditch' becomes his mantra. Making underperforming people better makes everyone feel good.

In reality, that is the last place the managing partner should try to make a difference. It is a bad use of his resources. Even if he succeeds marginally, which is unlikely, there will be little impact on the firm's financial results.

The managing partner should devote his time and energy to people who are 75 to 80 per cent on the way down the right side of the curve. Those lawyers know success. They exhibit the talents necessary to generate business, work hours or lead. Moving that group five to ten per cent up the scale can make a big impact on the firm's bottom line.

Mentoring and encouraging them will not only be well received but will have a dramatic impact on the financial success of the firm. While no group of partners should ever be ignored, the managing partner must devote his time and energy to the people who will most affect the firm's success.

Learning from history

In summary, managing partners cannot live in the past; nor can they ignore history. Whether it relates to business generation, working hours or leadership, managing partners find it difficult (if not impossible) to break a lawyer's historical pattern. Leaders make the best use of their time in making successful people more successful. That approach results in better results for the individual lawyer and the firm. **mp**

Focusing your efforts

Given this context and the historical pattern of people, where should the managing partner best place his efforts to increase productivity? Make no mistake, despite the challenge, the managing partner must continue to make people perform better. He just needs to be sure that he directs his efforts and the firm's resources to generate the best return on his investment.

