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Five things a managing partner should (almost) never do

‘Never’ is an absolute word. It is a big word. Leaders rarely deal in absolutes. Any prohibition carries with it the proverbial exception that makes the rule.

The following five rules can be used as solid guidelines for decision making. Naturally, every course has some curves and unexpected detours, so facts and circumstances may sometimes require a different approach. However, there should always be a good reason for taking a detour. It is often easier to stray than to stay the course, but that does not make the detour a better road to travel.

1. Never change your mind

Everyone changes their mind. They get input, they look around, they see they have made a bad decision and decide to go in a different direction. That is fine in life, but it makes leading a law firm difficult. In reality, this rule requires only that the leader gets all the necessary input before he makes a decision. After soliciting enough opinions to make the decision, it should be communicated to the interested parties.

After doing that, the direction should never change. To do so would undermine trust and credibility, the managing partner’s most vital commodities. Excuses such as “I talked it over with the management team” or “the board didn’t agree with me” mean little to the person relying on the announced decision. In short, get input before you make a decision and then never look back.

2. Never ignore the staff

A law firm’s lifeblood is its staff. Without their support, the managing partner’s life can be very difficult. Rainmakers and smart lawyers carry a law firm to great heights, but the staff form its foundation. At some point, the managing partner will need the staff to help implement a tough decision.

That is when the cultivation over time of good staff rapport becomes important.

Staff morale sets the tempo of the firm. To keep strong staff support, meet with them on a regular basis. Most importantly, avoid surprises. A change in compensation or bonus policy needs to be communicated early and with a full explanation. Early warnings do not make unpleasant news any better, but they do allow people time to prepare for the impact of the news.

“Get input before you make a decision and then never look back”

3. Never lead from behind

The managing partner sets the vision of the firm. He must know where he wants the firm to go. He should consult with many people to develop that vision. Those meetings should be centred on the managing partner’s vision, not an open question about the firm’s direction. Sometimes the vision changes, but it should always be a top-down vision supported by bottom-up input, not vice versa.

4. Never hide behind firm culture

Firm culture becomes an excuse for almost every road not travelled. “We don’t do things that way” or “that’s not part of our culture” can mask indecision by the managing partner. Law firms must be willing to change when the times and circumstances require it.

A good leader will not shy away from taking the firm in a different direction. Changing culture may take salesmanship,

time and a good plan, but it is worth it. The toughest, but perhaps most important, job of any leader is to understand when change is needed and to sell that change to his constituents. In making changes, the managing partner must salute firm culture, but not use it as an excuse for inaction.

5. Never base a partner presentation solely on numbers

Numbers are very important to the success of a law firm. They can be used to drive daily and long-term decisions. Unfortunately, numbers offer little help in motivating or setting a direction for lawyers.

In reality, most lawyers do not understand or care about numbers. Talking with them about how many dollars per day a firm has to generate or how much time value the lawyers recorded last month has little or no impact. Lawyers want to hear about clients, firm achievements and strategies. They want the big picture.

All presentations should focus on where the firm needs to go and how it is progressing on that path. Numbers should come into play on an individual basis. Talking one-on-one about performance, hours and realisation keeps everyone focused. Using numbers to talk about compensation and the success or failure of the firm can be effective. On the other hand, relying on those statistics for a partner presentation does little to help the firm or its managing partner.

In summary, a baseline of ‘nevers’ makes running a law firm easier and more productive. Sometimes facts and circumstances require a different approach. Generally speaking, though, following the five rules set out above gives every leader a better chance at success. ■

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