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Law firm leadership: A tough job that everyone wants

This article begins a series on law firm leadership; the topic presents almost as many challenges as the job itself. This column will examine the traits and characteristics of law firm leaders, both good and bad.

The term 'law firm' encompasses everything from sole practitioner to mega-multinational firms. 'Leadership' embraces everyone from the head of the library committee (if that still exists) to the managing partner. The wide range of firms and leaders make it difficult to come up with a one-size-fits-all garment.

To narrow the subject, this column will focus on the leadership traits of successful managing partners of mid to large-sized firms.

Lightning in a bottle

Identifying what makes a good managing partner makes catching lightning in a bottle seem simple. Talking about successful managing partners is easy. Identifying why they succeed presents some unique challenges.

Successfully leading a law firm depends on the firm, its culture and its expectations of the managing partner. In a strong managing partner environment, leadership becomes paramount and usually means success or failure.

In firms with managing partners who devote the bulk of their time to practicing law or sitting on management committees, benign neglect often leads to as much success as strong leadership. The managing partner should first decide if the firm requires strong leadership. Next, he should decide how to lead.

MP vs. CEO

Other than peers at other firms, few role models exist for law firm leaders. Business schools use the lure of panels of CEOs to entice novice managing partners to seminars on leadership.

In reality, leading a law firm presents many more challenges than being a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. The skills needed to lead a law firm differ substantially from those of a corporate CEO. The public company CEO surrounds himself with a few direct reports and many levels of bureaucracy.

“To be successful, a managing partner must lead a firm of successful ‘type A’ personalities in the same direction – or at least convince them to stay out of the way”

The CEO works to increase share value, while insulating himself from employees and all but large shareholders. Issues of employee pay or morale and discontent rarely make it to the top floor. Few CEOs look up to find a shareholder complaining about the lack of coffee in the break room.

On the other hand, flat management structures predominate among law firms. Regardless of how the organisational chart reads, law firm direct reports include every lawyer in the firm. The managing partner's door must always be open.

Successful managing partners interact on a regular basis with all of the partners. Knowing each person's name, what he does and what he finds important (including coffee in the break room) often makes the difference between success and failure.

Leading the pack

Leading while being one of the crowd presents the ultimate challenge for a

managing partner. Lawyers want to be led, but they don't want to follow. Appearing to stay in line while moving to the front makes for effective and successful leadership.

The aspiring managing partner looking for a skill set to emulate would be better served by understanding what makes a successful sports coach or manager. Most successful coaches understand who responds to a 'kick in the pants', who needs to be left alone and who needs to be praised.

Understanding those principles puts a managing partner well on the road to success.

Writers often compare running a law firm to herding cats. To be successful, a managing partner must lead a firm of successful 'type A' personalities in the same direction – or at least convince them to stay out of the way. Add to that challenge the continuing anomaly of law firm governance created by the partnership.

One day, the managing partner tells a partner what to do. The next day, the same partner votes to approve or disapprove actions taken by the managing partner. No *Fortune 500* CEO faces that challenge.

Given all of these problems and difficulties, who would want the job? Thankfully, people continue to volunteer. Ego? The challenge? A desire to make the firm better? Who knows, but the line stretches out the door to take the helm.

Look on this article as an introduction to what lies ahead. The topic is broad and deep. Over the next few months, I will try to present ideas that all managing partners can use to become more successful. mp

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