

Evaluating Your Performance As A Managing Partner

by Patrick J. McKenna

There is an old adage in managing a client's expectations that states, whether we like it or not, we are going to be measured. If we take a very passive approach the measuring stick against which we will be measured will be exclusively a creation of our client. Alternatively, we can help create and shape the measurement criteria.

This same principle is equally true for you as a new Managing Partner (MP), especially in dealing with your Executive Committee (EC). In a way, your partners and the members of your firm's EC now form your expanded client constituency. Working with your colleagues, early in your tenure, to formulate an evaluation process is a great opportunity for you to manage everyone's expectations.

The most basic element in structuring *any* performance appraisal is to first establish the expectations upon which your evaluation will be made. Without proper clarification of expectations, it's very difficult to conduct an effective evaluation. It's like trying to hit a moving target. Different firms have different expectations of their MP. In adopting a format for the MP appraisal, performance expectations need to be articulated and agreed upon by all involved.

You should begin, in discussion with the members of your EC, with a candid identification of your goals and objectives. These discussions should emphasize what you are expected to achieve (such as increased revenue from a problematic office), where you might need to direct more attention (such as identifying and developing future practice group leaders), and even, how you may be expected to behave.

It is critical that any qualitative and quantitative measures, goals and priorities be established by you and the Executive Committee members together. By taking a snapshot of the firm at the beginning of a year and then again at the end, your evaluation can help assess: "*Is the firm in better shape as a result of my efforts as the firm leader?*"

In order to make that assessment, you must agree upon the definition of "better shape." Look at the following as a Menu that you can modify (wordsmith), add to, and choose from, such that you can develop an acceptable list of criteria to suit your needs and the expectations your partners may have of you as their firm leader:

Managing Partner Sample Evaluation Criteria

1. Does the Managing Partner (MP) **communicate to the other partners** regularly (at least monthly), and in a meaningful way about what he / she is doing and what is going on within the firm?
2. How well has the MP functioned as the firm's **strategic thinker**? Does the MP devote adequate time and proper attention to thinking about where the firm should

- be going, what practice areas should be abandoned or developed, and what new markets should be entered?
3. Does the MP regularly **monitor external trends** and changes occurring in the profession, participate in relevant associations and practice management conferences, and bring new ideas to the firm?
 4. How effective has the MP been in selling his/her **new ideas** to the other partners?
 5. How effective has the MP been at **building consensus** among the partners, where needed?
 6. Has the MP ensured that the firm has developed a **written strategic plan** that is revisited and monitored regularly and a well-articulated direction for growth? Does the plan present a healthy blend of long-term thinking vs. short-term results?
 7. Does the firm have a written **human resources** (career and competency development) plan that integrates with the firm's strategic plan? (to get the right people on the bus, the wrong ones off and everyone in the right seats.)
 8. Is the MP effective at **managing implementation** of the firm's strategic plan? Have written action plans been created, with deadlines and responsibilities assigned? How good is the MP at getting things done?
 9. Has the MP made a meaningful contribution to improving the firm's **profitability**?
 10. Has the MP helped established procedures for achieving partner **accountability**? Are the partners in the firm truly held accountable for their conduct and performance?
 11. Does the firm operate with a **team feeling** - where partners collaborate, bring others in on their clients, help each other out even if there is no immediate compensation for it, cross-sell each other, foster a feeling of "team" rather than silos or solos practicing under one roof?
 12. Has the MP contributed to the development and strengthening of **effective practice groups** (also formal industry groups or client teams)? Do group leaders meet with the MP on any regular basis to share best practices, identify specific challenges they are facing and learn from each other?
 13. Does the MP require all **practice** and industry groups to develop their own strategic **plans**? Does he/she hold the groups accountable and to reporting, at least quarterly, on their progress to achieving their game plans?
 14. Has the MP developed an effective style, methodology, and regular discipline of **coaching** those practice leaders that report to him/her to help them develop and succeed?
 15. Does the MP address and resolve partner conflicts and partner **performance problems** swiftly and effectively?

16. Has the MP's involvement in the **partner compensation systems** been effective? Do a strong majority of partners feel the system for allocating income is reasonable and fair?
17. Does the MP make **decisions** promptly and effectively? Is the MP a good problem solver?
18. Do the partners feel that the MP **listens** and is genuinely interested in what they are saying? Does the MP encourage partners, and all firm personnel, to express their opinions?
19. How effective has the MP been at identifying **lateral** candidates, validating their credentials and bringing individual stars and practice groups into the fold?
20. Has the MP made contributions to making the firm a **great place to work** where retention is high, training effective, recruiting successful, and morale outstanding?
21. Does the MP take decisive action to ensure that the firm's **culture is consistent** among the various offices?
22. Has the firm established a **strong marketing** culture? Has the MP played an important role in making this happen?
23. Has the MP assembled and empowered an effective **management team** (COO, marketing director, human resources manager, etc.) that performs well and to which the MP confidently delegates day-to-day management duties?
24. Are the **basic administrative matters** of the firm handled efficiently and timely (WIP billed, write-offs challenged, receivables collected, timesheets in on time, issuance of internal financials, and monitoring of budgets, etc.)?
25. How well does the MP keep the performance bar high on issues of work **quality**, client service quality and standards, integrity and ethics?
26. Does the MP **meet key clients** of the firm on a regular basis to get a sense of what is going on in the marketplace and assess the client's level of satisfaction?
27. Is the MP **visible in the community** and is the firm represented well? Does the MP help the firm maintain a strong public image and brand identity?
28. Does the MP's conduct always take the **firm's perspective** as opposed to his/her own or that of a particular group of partners?
29. Does the MP **set an example** and served as a good role model to partners and staff in the firm for conveying personal respect, being accessible, following the rules, etc.?

These criteria should serve as a starting point for you to develop your evaluation form. Hopefully this will also get everyone thinking and acting on formalizing the process of professionally managing your firm.

The Process

From the outset, you and your EC need to agree on the format, timing and responsibilities for the evaluation. Typically your performance evaluation should occur (at least) annually.

Your first evaluation process should begin with you, as the Managing Partner, preparing a written self-evaluation of your own performance. By allowing you to conduct a self-evaluation, you will likely be more comfortable receiving feedback from the Committee, knowing that you had a voice in the process. In mid-December, you might send the Committee your assessment of your past performance as well as your plan for the coming year, including personal leadership objectives.

Partners evaluating the MP should be limited to those in a position to offer informed input. This means that in firms of fewer than about 50 partners, all the partners should probably participate. But once a firm gets beyond that size, the firm may wish to limit the evaluation to those partners on the management or executive committee.

Once it has been decided who should participate in the evaluation, each partner should complete an evaluation form. Someone should then tabulate the forms and summarize the results. The evaluations should be done on a semi-anonymous basis. In other words, partners names should be on the forms so that the coordinator of the review process can go back to people for clarification and amplification of responses. But you, as the MP, should not be told who said what.

The process should evidence a meeting between you and a small committee (no more than three partners) charged with delivering the results and engaging in a discussion about what your goals should be for the next following months. This sub-committee needs to be sensitive in presenting the feedback in a way that anyone will be able to hear and appreciate the message. A report is then delivered to the full EC regarding the evaluation and outlining the follow-up actions.

Your job can be a lonely one. Some may be reluctant to offer constructive critique for fear of repercussions. Some may be reluctant to provide feedback for fear of offending or hurting your feelings. But to be effective you need feedback to confirm whether or not you should keep doing what you have been doing and to get direction on what your partners expect.

© 2010 Patrick J. McKenna

Patrick J. McKenna (www.patrickmckenna.com) has worked with the top management of premier law firms internationally to discuss, challenge and escalate their thinking on how to manage and compete effectively. He is co-author of business bestseller *First Among Equals* and current co-leads a bi-annual program entitled, *First 100 Days: The New Managing Partner's Master Class*, held at the University of Chicago.