

INDIANA LAWYER

Service Aims To Help New Managing Partners

Michael Dabney - Special to Indiana Lawyer

Brian K. Burke certainly could have used the service when he was first named chairman and chief executive officer of Baker & Daniels in 1993. But at the time, there were no law school courses and few professional services geared toward helping new managing partners understand the professional and management challenges they would face in their new positions.

"In the corporate world, for example, most Fortune 500 companies have some in-house mechanism for helping prepare people for leadership positions," said Burke, who stepped down as the managing partner at Baker & Daniels in 2007 after 15 years in the post. "We (lawyers) choose our leaders differently, and they might not have a prior experience in leadership."

To help new managing partners, Burke and Patrick J. McKenna, a principal of Edge International, a Canadian-based management consulting company for law firms, developed an innovative program this spring for new managing partners to seek advice through the Leadership Advisory Board, which is hosted in affiliation with Managing Partner magazine.

Most law firm leaders have very limited resources from which to draw guidance, Burke said.

"What we are trying to do is provide that," Burke said.

"New firm leaders often face challenges that require a mix of luck, skill, and the support of experienced peers to guide their efforts," McKenna wrote on his Web site regarding the advisory board. "The LAB has been formed to address and inform the burning issues at the top of the managing partner agenda ... issues like strategy, governance, performance, and profitability."

To access the service, managing partners need only log onto the magazine's Web site, www.mpmagazine.com, and anonymously pose questions, discuss issues, or express challenges.

Though all male, eight law firm leaders from across the nation comprise the advisory board. Burke and McKenna will circulate the anonymous inquiries to

the board members, gather and synthesize the group's feedback, and draft a cogent response.

"It is staggering to think that corporate CEOs and other C-level people in the corporate world train their entire careers in order to be prepared when it is their turns to take the helm, but law firms put people at the helm ... with little or no formal training and almost no mentoring," McKenna wrote on his Web site.

While there are similarities, there are major difference between corporation management and law-firm management. Perhaps the most telling is that corporate management is vertical while law firm management is largely horizontal.

"In law firms, the partners are part of the business. A law firm's structure isn't nearly as vertical as a corporate structure," said Byron Myers, chief managing partner at Ice Miller. "And the partners are much more involved than a (corporate) board of directors."

Three years ago, Myers was named one of three co-managing partners at Ice Miller who devoted half of their time to managing the firm and half to practicing law. But roughly 18 months ago, the firm decided to have just one managing partner who would devote all of his time to managing the firm.

"They thought (having one managing partner) would be more efficient," said Myers, who is in his first four-year term as Ice Miller's sole managing partner. His term will expire in 2010.

Myers said when he started, he had the of his co- who were already experienced in the job. In addition, Ice Miller is part of a 19-member law firm group from which Myers said he also draws support.

Burke said while firms might belong to a network of law firms and partners might get together locally or regionally with other managing partners, "it is by its nature a very delicate situation. And it can be awkward for managing partners to ask questions in such settings about the more sensitive personal, or operational issues they find themselves confronting."

That is what the new service is designed to correct, Burke said.

He admitted there are outside management consulting services available to managing partners to help them with their jobs, but the services don't necessarily involve practicing attorneys.

"What we are talking about is bringing to bear the experience of people who have done the job and are doing the job, instead of people who are teaching about how to do it," Burke said.

He said there are probably four main challenges facing a new law firm leader -

helping clients, establishing the firm's strategic direction, building and maintaining the organization, and managing the firm's practice groups.

And the two greatest skills new law-firm leaders must master to face those challenges are listening and persuasion, he said.

"To be a managing partner you have to build a consensus of the partners," said Myers.

Persuasion is important because at the end of the day the managing partner is only one partner in the firm, Burke said. And to move the firm forward, there must be a consensus of the partners.