

Do You Know What It Takes To Be A Firm Leader?

by Patrick J. McKenna

About five years ago I developed and began co-facilitating a special one-day workshop for brand new firm chairs and managing partners to help them prepare for taking on the enormous role of becoming their firm's leader. This opportunity came about as a result of my having been engaged back in 2004 by a long-time client, an AmLaw 100 firm, to assist the Board in its selection of the next full-time managing partner and to then help that individual get comfortable in his new role.

What I quickly discovered was that most professionals have a naiveté about the skills and knowledge that are really required to manage a professional services firm; that they don't squarely confront the reality of their new position; and that (in their defense) they are the unfortunate victims of a system that does a poor job of preparing anyone to be the next firm leader.

To make my point, the following list of challenges is based on the input of over 50 new firm leaders. Compiled after an extensive series of interviews, the list underscores many of the unexpected demands inherent in being a new firm leader, which these lawyers hadn't fully anticipated when they first accepted the responsibility.

It is hoped that this list will assist any potential new incumbent in properly fine-tuning his or her thinking before confronting the magnitude of the firm leadership job.

Your challenge will be...

1. Resisting the belief that, having served as a practice group head, office managing partner, or on the firm's executive committee, you are now provided adequate preparation for taking on the role of leading the entire firm. In other words, the first challenge is to understand that you still have much to learn, whatever your background.
2. Determining how to transition some or all of your client obligations to one or more other partners in a manner that is comfortable for the clients involved.
3. Attending to the needs of your family as your change in responsibilities demands even more time at the office and likely more time spent traveling. The transition will affect them whether you wish to acknowledge it now or not.
4. Understanding that you cannot be an advocate (no matter how much your best friends and close colleagues lobby you to play that role) for your old practice

- area, department, or office. Your job is to build consensus, and that requires you to balance competing interest; to recognize that you are now working from a larger landscape; and to always appear resolutely interested in serving the best interests of the entire firm.
5. Suppressing the misleading “lessons” of all prior leadership positions. You will need to be extra cautious rather than assume that some particular issue you may now face is the same as one you saw and addressed during an earlier leadership experience.
 6. Recognizing that you don’t have or know all of the answers when you assume this position. You will soon discover that some of the answers you thought you knew are not ultimately all that workable in the real world.
 7. Avoiding undue bias derived from your predecessor’s experience, programs, or influence (the vestiges of the fabled “good old days”). You will need to set your own path for the firm based on a thoughtful read of evolving trends and the aspirations of your partners.
 8. Finding effective ways to build the new relationships that you need to have with your peers, and to navigate around the politics of the firm. As the firm leader you may learn a few unexpected lessons about who the power partners with influence within the firm really are.
 9. Overcoming the confusion and uncertainty about what is really expected of you. It’s a particularly daunting prospect when 91 percent of new firm leaders report that it takes more than 100 days, and 72 percent say it takes well over six months, to become productive in this new role.
 10. Dealing with the sudden isolation of the job. It’s lonely at the top, as they say.
 11. Being adequately self-aware of your personal strengths and shortcomings such that you can take the proper steps to counteract any perceived weaknesses.
 12. Having sufficient time to prepare and get up to speed before Day One and to ensure that you are properly oriented to take on the new responsibilities when that day arrives.
 13. Understanding, and being able to live with the fact that everyone in the firm is scrutinizing your every move and that the impact of your actions (and any missteps) will inevitably be magnified.
 14. Preparing yourself so that you are not immediately overwhelmed by the conflicting demands (telephone calls, email, personal requests for meetings, etc.)

- that will only increase, exponentially, and continue to compete for your time and attention.
15. Facing and mastering a steep learning curve as you meet with colleagues and confront issues that require your intensive analysis and thought.
 16. Devising a personal work strategy so that you don't fall into the trap of taking on far too much, too quickly, during your initial first months in office.
 17. Believing that your appointment represents a mandate for change (and being ready to pursue it), you must define and develop the skills and techniques to effectively obtain your partners' buy-in if you are to overcome resistance to the change agenda.
 18. Managing your daily agenda carefully and making sure your initial schedule has ample "walking around" time to communicate directly with each of your partners.
 19. Listening attentively to everything you are told while not reading too much into what others say or jumping to conclusions about what someone means. You need to develop the patience to fully understand the situation before making incomplete assumptions.
 20. Finding the right pace for making changes, as moving too quickly can cause as many problems as moving too slowly.
 21. Brushing up on your meeting management skills because, whether you like it or not, the principal forum from which you will lead is a series of meetings. That's where your real work gets done.
 22. Applying tools and skills to manage and lead groups, teams, and offices that are separated by geography and work cultures.
 23. Recognizing that, rather than promoting big bold initiatives prematurely, you may likely need to achieve some quick, small successes in order to help inspire initial confidence in your leadership.
 24. Understanding the role of symbolic actions, behaviors, and rituals.
 25. Critically assessing each of the administrative professionals that you have inherited to determine if and how they will compliment your goals and aspirations. You must develop systems for how you can manage most effectively through your administrative group.

26. Investing sufficient time to make an in-depth assessment as to how the firm is performing against its strategic plan. Understand what the existing mission-critical issues are as well as the emerging ones.
27. Dealing with higher (possibly unrealistic) expectations on the part of the firm's partnership and executive committee for you to find ways to enhance the firm's growth and profitability in a time of flat or declining demand for services.
28. Resisting the comfortable belief that your first 100 days represents a period of tolerance and innocence when, in fact – beginning Day One – judgments are being formed, biases hardened, and allegiances solidified. What happens at the immediate outset will affect your ability to accomplish your goals for the duration of your leadership.
29. Finding ways to get some distance from the job and recharge your energy levels.

Yes, it's a formidable list. Why not, it's a tough job.

Copyright 2013. [Patrick J. McKenna](#)

***Patrick J. McKenna** (patrickmckenna.com) is an internationally recognized authority on law practice management and strategy. Since 1983, he has worked with the top management of premier law firms around the globe 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 *Serving At The Pleasure of My Partners: Advice To The NEW Firm Leader* published by Thomson Reuters in 2011; was identified by Lawdragon as one of "the most trusted names in legal consulting" and the subject of a Harvard Law case study entitled: *Innovations In Legal Consulting*. He advises executive committees and boards on leadership selection and succession issues and co-leads a program entitled: *First 100 Days* (first100daysmasterclass.com) usually held at the University of Chicago. Reach him at patrick@patrickmckenna.com*