

Advise To A Leadership Successor

Question posed by **Brian Burke** to members of LAW FIRM LEADERS LinkedIn Group:

As you think back over your years of service as a managing partner, as you think about some of the leadership lessons that you've learned (perhaps some through trials of fire), what one important suggestion, idea or piece of advice would you offer that individual (and assume it's your best friend) who becomes your successor.

So far, about four years in, the most significant positive thing I have learned is the value of hiring well on the staff side. Having really outstanding leaders has both compensated for some of my early naivete about management and leadership, and quite frequently made me look better than I deserved to. As a corollary, my predecessor was very good about easing out some underperformers, taking any heat and giving me a cleaner slate to work from.

(Dave Baca, Managing Partner – Davis Wright Tremaine, Portland)

Effective planning and execution is fundamental to the success of a leader. As lawyers, we are well trained to excel at that fundamental skill. I think the key piece of advice I would give relates to the topic of several of the other comments - but let me put it more broadly - work hard to be an effective communicator. In a law firm, effective communication is an asymmetrical challenge. Effective communication techniques range from casual conversations with your partners to formal publications and meetings to keep your whole firm informed. We have seen recently how ineffective communication brought down a very highly regarded law firm and I think we all have experienced how staying in touch with the human capital of your firm allowed us to weather some difficult economic times. How to develop an effective internal communication strategy requires a lot of thought and reflection - thinking how your firm culture best absorbs information - but it is some of the most important time you will invest.

Jeff Haidet, Chairman – McKenna Long & Aldridge, Washington DC

When I first started in the position, I felt like all I was doing was meeting, talking and exchanging e-mails with partners. I wondered when I was going to find time to get my work done. Three years later I have come to realize that maintaining dialogue with individual partners is the most important part of the job. That is how you win and maintain the trust and confidence of your partners and how you get their buy-in, all of which are necessary outcomes to being an effective leader. You don't have to be able to resolve every concern your partners raise, but they need to know that you are listening. So my advice to a successor would be to make sure you go out of your way every day to stay in close contact with your partners.

(Fred Lautz, Firm Managing Partner – Quarles & Brady, Milwaukee)

When working with my board, one of the most difficult things I had to learn was to be patient and respect the decision-making process. Early in my term, I would become frustrated at having to go through a formal procedure to reach a decision that was obvious to me. My predecessor told me that the process is often as important than the outcome, if not more so. Once I learned that lesson, my interactions with the board became much less contentious.

(Michael Fandel, Managing Partner – Graham & Dunn, Seattle)

Realize that your most significant contributions to the firm are no longer in the form of billable hours and direct revenue generation, but rather, providing leadership and direction to the firm that will enable exponentially greater value than you could ever provide through traditional lawyering.

(David Kleppinger, Chairman – McNeese Wallace & Nurick, Harrisburg)

All of the comments so far are spot-on. Another way of expressing Dave Baca's advice (with which I wholeheartedly agree) would be this: Learn to interact with and treat your partners the same way you have treated your clients over the years before becoming Managing Partner . . . understanding that some need more attention than others, some merit more time than others, etc. In many respects, your partners are your clients after you assume the leadership role.

(Thomas Terp, Managing Partner – Taft Stettinius & Hollister, Cincinnati)

We've restructured our Board of Directors and as a result of the restructure, we've endeavored to achieve demographic diversity in our leadership. Therefore, our Board consists of 3 individuals under 45; the managing attorney from our largest satellite office; 2 women leaders; and no more than 2 members representing any one practice group. In addition, we've sent one Board member last year (and are planning to send others in the future) to the Lex Mundi advanced leadership program in Monterey, CA for a one-week intensive training program. My goal is to have 3 or 4 attorneys fully prepared to take over my position in 4 1/2 years. The best single piece of advice I can give to my successor is that my successor listen carefully to our universally respected COO before making a major decision. She has great instincts and carefully monitors both monetary and citizenship performance. The second best piece of advice would be to form personal relationships with the eight to ten top rainmakers in the firm. At a recent leadership forum, two things were emphasized: 1. No matter how strong the firm, every firm is only 6 to 8 attorneys away from collapse. I'm sure that each of us can identify who the critical 6 to 8 attorneys are in our shops. 2. Long term loyalty to firms is abating. The forum presenters pointed to the "free agency" mentality among several rainmakers. That presents opportunity and red flags for each of us.

(Charlie Miller, Managing Shareholder – Bernstein Shur Sawyer & Nelson, Portland)

Keep your head down and follow through. Head down in the sense of going slow to make changes. Develop a constituency by talking to as many lawyers and staff as you can. Actually by listening to as many as you can. Follow through by having a plan, explaining it, and then executing it. The ability to explain your vision so that others not only understand it, but buy into it, differentiates a leader from a manager.

(Julious Smith, Chairman Emeritus – Williams Mullen, Richmond)

I echo many of the comments previously shared by other group members. I would tell my successor to be patient, carefully listen, and work your hardest to develop and strengthen institutional loyalty. Patience and listening are key to maximizing your chances of developing necessary buy-in for implementing long-lasting initiatives, while at the same time strengthening institutional loyalty.

(Rudy Parga, Managing Shareholder – Ryley Carlock & Applewhite, Phoenix)

You were selected to guide the Firm to professional and financial success and therefore to make the best decisions for the Firm. In pursuing this obligation, you will undoubtedly make

some individuals uncomfortable (or downright mad). Don't take it personally. Bolster your decisions by regular communication with your partners, associates and staff and remember to SMILE -- this too shall pass!

(Rhea Law, CEO & Chair – Fowler White Boggs, Tampa)

First, being a good listener is by far the most important skill for success. You must keep enough time in your day open for your partners to talk to you about their practices and their concerns. Second, the advice above about not taking things personally is also great advice. You have to remember that if you try to do things that are right for the Firm inevitably some of those things will adversely affect individual partners from time to time. For your own sanity you must be satisfied that the decisions you make are fair and you must also develop the reputation for making fair decisions or you will quickly lose your credibility. Third, you can't over communicate your ideas for moving the Firm forward. Consistent and constant communication about Firm direction is critical to buy in. I call it shampoo, rinse and repeat. You know it's working when you hear other people saying the things you are saying. Finally, if you are also a practicing attorney, lead by example. If you think for example that your partners should be spending more time on thought leadership nothing will add more credibility to your implementation efforts than spending some of your own time speaking and writing and visiting clients. Nothing takes the "I'm too busy getting my billable work done" excuse away from your partners faster than if they know you are walking the walk on the things you are asking them to do.

(Tim Mohan, Chief Executive Partner – Chapman and Cutler, Chicago)

As has been eloquently stated, a key ingredient in successful stewardship as a managing partner is creating trust. Developing the right level of rapport with your partners takes time and patience, but you cannot achieve what is in the best interest of the firm without it. Another point made which bears repeating is that the process is often as important as the outcome. Results are better obtained if there is buy in along the way.

(Lawrence Murphy, Managing Partner – Varnum Riddering, Grand Rapids)

If you think you have finally obtained a point when you have communicated your strategy and message then you know you are just beginning.

(Bryan Schwartz, Chairman – Levenfeld Pearlstein, Chicago)

Never assume that just because you have communicated strategies to your partners that they have either adopted them or even remembered them. You cannot over-communicate on the fundamental elements that drive the firm.

(Jim Hill, Executive Chairman – Benesch Friedlander, Cleveland)

Always act in the best interest of the firm, even if it may impact you or your best friends in the firm negatively. And remember that no matter what you do, you'll never make everyone happy--but you can tick everyone off.

(Jack Cleveland, Chair and Managing Partner – Thompson Coe, Dallas)

Use your credibility wisely. This means always being prepared for meetings with you partners or partner groups, have the data you need to support any new initiatives, and sound out your proposals with key opinion leaders in the firm before making formal proposals. This means that you need to be patient with moving your ideas forward and it is hard to accomplish your objectives if you do not get buy-in for them.

(Alan Becker, Managing Partner – Lichfield Cavo, Chicago)

Communicate, communicate -- no surprises. And you must act -- and be perceived to act -- on the merits, without favorites and special exceptions. You must do this while cultivating and tending to the rainmakers, which means you must have the credibility to prevent a prima dona culture from developing that overrides the core principles and values of the firm.

Graeme Bush, Chairman – Zuckerman Spaeder, Washington DC

Don't be completely transparent in your thinking as you develop a new policy or initiative. Feel free to gather advice and insights from others before they know exactly where you stand, and be aware that too much "thinking out loud," too soon, can create a problem. Then, be completely transparent as you commit to, and lead others to committing to, the policy or initiative.

Lowell Stortz, Managing Partner – Leonard Street and Deinard, Minneapolis

The best advice I received and would pass on is "know when to engage." MP's, particularly early in their service, are consulted about every trivial problem or copied on a lot of emails describing problems or disputes of every level of importance. We are trained as problem solvers and rarely see a problem we do not want to try to fix. What we allow ourselves to be drawn into will define our effectiveness at the important roles for which we were selected - many of which were described by the others above. If we allow ourselves to be drawn into micromanagement, we will not have time for leadership, effective communication, developing relationships with key partners and clients, etc. Learn to read or hear about problems "for information only." Know when to hit delete. Know when you must engage and when not. The important corollary is to learn to effectively delegate and support those to whom you delegate so their decisions stick for the most part. The standard cannot be "how I would have done it" lest we undermine and become micromanagers. Micromanagers will not be able to effectively lead. Nor will they be able to attract and develop the best future leaders because of the demoralizing effect of being micromanaged.

Charles P. Adams, Jr., Managing Partner – Adams and Reese, New Orleans

Be a leader, not just a manager.

(Jerry Biederman, Managing Partner – Neil Gerber & Eisenberg, Chicago)