

Where New Leaders Spend Their Time

by Patrick J. McKenna

In accepting any new leadership position you are dealing with *firsts*. And as with other firsts in life, where specifically you choose to invest your precious and finite management time can impact your future effectiveness and leave a long-lasting impression on everyone involved. It goes without saying therefore, that where you spend your time should be entered into with some thoughtful and deliberate intent.

In an attempt to examine where new leaders have spent their time, I surveyed and spoke with the new managing partners of 19 U.S. law firms, between 100 and 400 attorneys in size. My objective was to determine specifically whether there were any identifiable patterns for where these leaders spent their time, how productive they viewed their initial efforts, and now in hindsight, whether there was anything they might have done differently.

I started by inviting each of them to identify three key activities that consumed the better part of their time during their first few months. Many of them lamented that they were “much more internally focused than externally, during this period” and 24% of our respondents cited their efforts to proactively contact, meet with and interview fellow partners / shareholders as the primary activity that consumed the greatest portion of their management time.

While that may have been the deliberate objective of a good number of these new leaders, another 18% found themselves busy responding to their partner’s requests for meetings and assistance with various matters while another 18% found themselves actively participating in the annual partner review, appraisal and compensation process.

Question 1:

Looking back to the period following the announcement of you becoming the firm’s new leader and the first 100 days or so of your term, which three (3) activities consumed the greatest portion of your management time:

- #1 Contacting, meeting and interviewing my fellow partners (24%)
- #2 Responding to my partners various requests for assistance/meetings (18%)
- #3 Participating in annual partner review, appraisal and compensation (18%)
- #4 Beginning to reshape the firm’s strategy (16%)
- #5 Assessing, rearranging, replacing members of my internal admin team (8%)
- #6 Learning and better understanding the financial aspects of the firm (5%)
- #7 Attending practice group meetings to learn what each group is doing (5%)
- #8 Meeting with associates and staff (2%)
- #9 Understanding the trends and competitive dynamics of the marketplace (2%)
- #10 Reading through meeting minutes and other materials (0%)
- #11 Participating in development of firm’s annual budget (0%)
- #12 Making contact and meeting with the firm’s key clients (0%)

The results above were encapsulated by one respondent who told us, “I didn’t appreciate the amount of time I would spend in meetings . . . meetings with administrative staff and meetings with attorneys. People want to be heard.”

And from another managing partner, I heard “The care and feeding of your law partners is a challenge. Each partner is unique and I never know what (seemingly minor) issue will bring out passion, anger and/or terror in a fellow partner.

In addition to the twelve activities listed above, a few respondents cited specific projects that they were committed to working on during their first few months. These leaders identified such things as opening a new office, re-establishing their firm’s role and visibility within the community, implementing a new compensation policy, working with partners on accounts receivable, and establishing more support for the attorneys’ business development efforts.

There was one particular activity that provoked some mixed feelings, and that was whether a new firm leader should be involved, immediately upon taking office, in participating in the partner’s annual reviews. “Our normal compensation review for our partners consumes most of February,” commented the managing partner of one firm. Some felt that the time required was brutal and others commented that this was not an ideal way to have to interact with their peers as the firm’s new leader.

On a related note, some were consumed with internal personnel issues that they wished their predecessor would have handled. “The internal issues actually started before my term began, when I was ‘shadowing’ my predecessor. It turns out that we really have some average, as opposed to stellar performance. I will be replacing our COO and probably others. This should not have been ‘my problem,’ but I’m fine with it.”

Applying Hindsight

I really feel that I should be spending more time on all these issues. That, of course, is not possible. I do just enough to keep all of the balls moving forward. What I really need to do more of is “management by walking around.” I did more of this during the first 100 days than I do now. I’ve been in the position for a little more than a year now. I’m now much more relaxed in the job, even though I now better understand the overwhelming scope of the job.

After having heard where leaders actually invested (proactively or reactively) their initial management time, I then posed the question of whether that was the right area to focus on. When asked whether, with the benefit of hindsight, they should have prioritized differently, respondents said that they would have focused more time in a number of areas. Interestingly, the most common refrain (from 28%) was, “I should have spent more time with clients.”

And in spite of ‘interviewing partners’ having been cited as the highest rated time consumer, another 31% of firm leaders emphasized the need to spend far more time communicating with partners, either in practice groups or one-on-one. “I can never communicate enough with my partners, even though I have been trying very hard in this regard,” explained one managing partner.

Question 2:

Looking back to the period following the announcement of you becoming the firm's new leader and the first 100 days or so of your term, do you think the amount of time spent on each of these activities should have been lower or higher?

I should have spent MORE time on:

- Making contact and meeting with firm's key clients (28%)
- Attending practice group meetings to learn what each group was doing (17%)
- Contacting, meeting and interviewing my fellow partners (14%)
- Learning and better understanding the financial aspects of the firm (11%)

I should have spent LESS time with:

- Responding to my partners various requests for assistance/meetings (45%)
- Reading through meeting minutes and other materials (18%)
- Participating in annual partner review, appraisal and compensation (9%)

The one area in which managing partners regret spending so much of their time was with responding to "every minor and trivial partner request and sitting in on meetings that seemed to make little sense for me to ever attend."

In the words of one DC managing partner, "Time passes so very quickly in this position. There is so much to do and so little time to do it. My biggest challenge has been tending to my personal practice while still giving enough time to management issues. There is NOT enough time to do both. While I work on one for a few days, the other suffers. Simply reading all of my email is a challenge. Also, each day seems to pass very quickly without me being able to pinpoint what I accomplished. It is difficult to move forward my major initiatives without doing it on weekends."

Leadership Tensions

My final question of these managing partners was intended to reflect another important element of the first 100 days – the need for any new leader to balance the various tensions that may emerge. I was curious to discover whether there were any particular tensions that surfaced more often than others during these initial months.

While the responses I received were 'all across the board' one particular leader expressed the thought that one could probably summarize my entire list of 14 tensions into his "needing to galvanize the partners to take ownership of the Firm's issues and to act like equity partners."

In this managing partners words, "Generally speaking, I enjoyed the first 100 days. In many respects it was less frustrating and more satisfying to implement your own judgment since a new managing partner is given deference, rather than having to work hard to influence others and work behind the scenes. Patience is definitely a virtue in this job but at

the same time I need, and people have responded to, the bully pulpit to exhort the partners to act outside their professional ‘billing attorney’ box.”

My third and final question asked of these 19 new managing partners was:

Question #3:

Looking back to the period following the announcement of you becoming the firm’s new leader and the first 100 days or so of your term, which three (3) of the following normal leadership tensions would you say were the most challenging for you?

13%	Being patient	while	Becoming productive
8%	Setting your own pace	while	Following the firm’s pace
8%	Trusting your intuition	while	Making deliberate decisions
15%	Pleasing your partners	while	Ensuring you meet your own priorities
13%	Initiating change	while	Respecting the history and culture of the firm
3%	Demonstrating competence	while	Seeking advice when needed
5%	Building new relationships	while	Testing assumptions about others
5%	Taking appropriate action	while	Waiting for enough information
3%	Drawing on past experience	while	Not letting past experience blind you to new realities
3%	Acting with conviction	while	Being open to learning
10%	Influencing decisions	while	Facilitating a consensus
5%	Not leading with your ego	while	Displaying confidence
8%	Making your position clear	while	Seeking input and feedback
3%	Strengthening bonds with people	while	Maintaining professional boundaries

As you can see, these top three tensions that seemed to resonate with most new leaders include.

- #1 Pleasing your partners while ensuring that you meet your own priorities
- #2 Being patient while becoming productive
- #3 Initiating change while respecting the history and culture of the firm.

It goes without saying that an important element of the first 100 days is the need for the new managing partner to establish respect in his leadership role at the top. As one respondent expressed it to me at the end of our discussion, “I see my job as maximizing credibility with my partners while moving forward with the least amount of dislocation.”

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