



FOR NEW MANAGING PARTNERS

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The path to becoming managing partner of a firm varies greatly. At some firms — mostly larger firms — the path is well lit, one travels it purposefully, and there are often many guideposts and milestones along the way. There is usually a well-established position description, albeit not always written, with mostly clear expectations. The larger the firm, the more likely there are existing management structures to help support the managing partner, such as committees, department chairs, and key administrative management personnel. Transition is mostly by design, and intended to be non-disruptive.

At mid-size firms, the path is not lit well and sometimes winds a bit, or even off-roads into rough terrain. Few guideposts exist. Milestones are often lacking. Expectations can be unclear. Transition is as likely to be a result of a disruption as by design. Sometimes there are those who sit back in judgment and wait for mistakes to be made, or even secretly try to cause the managing partner to fail. So while some follow the model of their larger competitors, just as many veer in an entirely different and less successful direction. Some managing partners, like law firm administrators, describe the process as “herding cats.”

I have known firms where the managing partner was selected because he/she was in the rest room and no one in the room wanted the job. A vote was hastily called; the absent partner won a booby prize. At some firms, the managing partner resigns abruptly in response to the last of a thousand barbs of criticism, which finally reach critical mass.

At small firms there are few choices. Usually the largest book of business is the determinant of who calls the shots. Surprisingly, this may not always be the person who holds the title and manages the day-to-day operations. Sometimes the person with the larger book wants to avoid the spotlight, as well as the sacrifice of time.

When these are separate individuals, the managing partner is often a figurehead, and rarely the one who decides difficult issues. This is usually a more stressful and frustrating arrangement, and more prone to stalemates and lack of progress, than when the managing partner truly has the power to make change and enforce policies and procedures.

What is common to all size firms is that often the person who willingly or unwillingly assumes the role, has little or no training in the skills and abilities required to do the job well. This lack of skill and ability is exacerbated at firms with unclear expectations, weak or ineffective management structure, and/or an absence of well-trained administrative management personnel.

The skills and abilities required to effectively run a complex organization are not the same as those required of a skilled lawyer; with the exception of relationship-building and communication. Add to that the fact that often — as the Buddha would say — one does not know what one does not know. Or in many cases, lawyers may just assume that because they are bright and successful, they will be bright and successful as managing partner. This is a fallacy.

So for all of you who currently are, will shortly become, or aspire to be managing partner, this is for you. This is an abbreviated guide to what you need to know. [For a specimen managing partner job description, send your request to lawpractice@pabar.org.]

The managing partner is responsible for overseeing the delivery of legal services to clients and the business management of the firm. Sounds simple, but at a minimum it requires

- a “big picture” vision of the future of the firm — defining how your firm will be different from your competitors; how it will provide greater value, greater creativity, assemble and retain better talent
- strategic research and thinking — determining how the firm will track client satisfaction; identify marketplace threats and opportunities and proactively respond and defend; identifying which projects will have the greatest impact on adding value for clients
- development of a business plan — brilliant ideas are worthless without an action plan identifying incremental objectives and tasks, resources, responsibilities, deadlines, and creating accountability

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- delegation — leveraging all the talent available at the firm and avoiding the attractive trap of micro-managing; building an A-Team to carry out plan details, implement changes, monitor essential areas and report regularly
- raising the firm's EQ — a more cynical colleague believes the majority of a managing partner's time is spent resolving internal disputes. In order to build buy-in and effectively manage conflict, a smart managing partner will seek to help partners individually and collectively develop their emotional intelligence in the areas of communications and conflict management. Time invested in fire prevention ultimately creates a healthier and more productive environment than spending the same time continually putting out fires.
- investing adequate time in managing the business side of the firm — balancing client work and firm management is challenging to say the least.
- building necessary skills to understand what is needed to properly oversee the core business management areas — developing systems and procedures to nurture, monitor, develop and empower personnel who work in technology, information management and security, finances, human resources, marketing, facilities, ethics, and internal communications.
- communicate with stakeholders frequently and clearly.

I have no doubt that the moment I deliver this article to the editor I will think of several additional bullet points which should have been included. Certainly this is not inclusive of everything you need to know how to do. I would be willing to wager that it seems sufficiently daunting nonetheless. Yes, this job is not merely about counting paper clips and making sure the bills get paid. No, it's not something one learns in law school. Often it's not something one learns as a partner at a firm, either.

The good news is that the required skills are learned skills. The bad news is that there's probably a lot to learn, and you can't learn it all at once. So you need to create a plan for your own development as a manager.



So where does that knowledge come from? Good law practice management seminars and articles. For example, take a peek at the table of contents of “Effective Law Firm Management Strategies” or “Risk Management: Survival Tools for Law Firms” in the ABA Bookstore. Subscribe to a decent eNewsletter in each core management area. Subscribe to an eNewsletter on leadership. Ask someone you admire what they read regularly to build these competencies. Or ask me to make a recommendation.

A managing partner has the opportunity to translate a vision into the reality of a progressive and successful law firm environment known for excellence, in which people enjoy practicing law and careers prosper. Or, a managing partner can simply maintain the status quo, put out fires, and provide marginal improvements. If you have the opportunity to serve in this role at your firm, it’s up to you to decide which path to take.

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