

Taking The Lead: New to the Job? Engaging Your People?

By Karen MacKay

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Last week I noticed a news item announcing a new managing partner at a major law firm in my region. There haven't been very many of those announcements lately. As a number of managing partners have recently shared with me, while they may wish they had handed over the reins a year ago, they feel an obligation to steward their firms through this difficult era.

Still, leadership changes in firms will be necessary sooner or later. If you are tapped on the shoulder by your partners, how will you take charge? How elegant will the transition be? How will you make your mark early in the process?

One thing we know about leadership in any organization, but particularly in law firms, is that when leadership changes, the organization changes and so do the profitability drivers. The profits may go up or go down with a new leader, but be assured, there will be change. To get you thinking about how to effectively achieve the right kind of change, here are pointers on using "presence, message and action" to engage your people in the end game.

Presence. In the leadership development work that I do, the phrase "executive presence" comes

up from time to time. The phrase captures the characteristics seen in leaders— some elusive and some concrete. It also captures concepts related to image as well as physical presence and visibility. (As my fellow column author Ed Flitton noted recently, your partners, associates and staff will be watching you—and all from their own perspectives.)

Presence is about your image, poise, confidence and presentation style. You will set a tone and present an image that will be your version of what a leader looks like and acts like. So will you be buttoned down or relatively casual? Will you make the job look easy or will you show your stress? Will you present a formal and rather distant style or will you have an open door?

Presence also means visibility. Will you visit every office, walk every floor, attend every group meeting and hold town hall meetings for the staff? Leaders all have one characteristic in common—they have people who will follow. Holding the reins means people will need to know who you are and what you stand for. They will need to know you, see you and hear you—in person— so you need to get out there.



Message. The culture of every law firm is different and evolves over time. The role of the leader is unique in every firm. In some the leader sets the direction, while in others the leader guides a discussion and builds consensus with inputs from all key stakeholders. Whether platoon leader or orchestra leader, however, people need to hear and understand your vision. Talk 20 percent of the time and listen the other 80 percent.

How can you connect with the people in your firm, both intellectually and emotionally? How can you communicate direction, hope, confidence and belief in the firm's future and your ability to steward it? Steward is a carefully chosen word in this context: Your stewardship means leaving the firm stronger than it was when you became a partner and stronger than it was when you took over as leader.

Action. Taking action, moving forward, getting people to do something ... therein lies the challenge of leadership. In the practice of law, when the document is done and the deal is signed, the work is done, right? But in the *business* of law when the document is done and

signed, the work is ready to begin. Your work means getting your people behind the plan, inspiring them to action, and breaking the action steps down into the right-chunk size so that individuals and groups can actually accomplish something. Take shareholders off-site and engage them in meaningful dialogue—get their input and buy-in and get them swimming in the same direction.

Leadership is about moving from idea to action, from talk to action, from plan to action and keeping up the momentum. Lastly, leadership is about holding people accountable, about reviewing actions taken and adjusting course as needed in order to achieve measurable change.

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