

## **Succeeding at Law Firm Leadership: Seven Strategies to Implement Now**

By John Remsen, Jr.

The title “Managing Partner” falls short of the mark in describing the work of the law firm leader. “Chief Executive Officer,” in my opinion, is more accurate. Terminology evolves so that some titles no longer reflect their original meaning. Managing partner has become such a term. When a managing partner is named, is the law firm really appointing a “manager” in the corporate sense? A manager, after all, is a caretaker responsible for oversight of a unit or department.

A recent survey on the topic of law firm management and leadership asked those polled to distinguish between a “manager” and a “leader.” Insights that the survey respondents offered included “management is mechanical, while leadership is inspirational” and “the leader sets the direction and the plan, while the manager implements the plan.”

Another survey respondent was more pointed – “Managers implement what leaders want them to do. Most law firm managers want to be loved and not to lead.” Saying that managers want most to be loved may overstate the case. But it does sum up the problem. If a law firm needs vision, inspiration, motivation, cohesion, consensus, direction setting and the establishing of firm-wide goals, it needs strong leadership committed to that work.

### **The Hard Realities of Leading Lawyers**

The hard realities of law firm leadership are apparent. Among them:

- The authority of lawyer management (or leadership) is derived from the willingness of the firm’s partners to be managed (or led);
- Partners perceive themselves as being owners of the firm, having certain prerogatives and independence, not as employees to be managed; and
- Each firm has its own personality and culture, and the management techniques effective in one firm may or may not be successful in another.

In the face of these hard realities, many managing partners retreat into the noncontroversial confines of day-to-day management, putting aside attempts to exercise true leadership. See the attached exhibit for data reinforcing this point.

## **The Seven Steps to Successful Law Firm Leadership**

### **1) *Create Job Descriptions for Yourself, Your Successor, and Other Firm Leaders.***

Remember, you're drafting a job description for a CEO, not a manager. Think of your job description as a contract with your partners. At minimum it should delineate the amount of time you will devote to management responsibilities. Your primary responsibilities should include strategic planning, setting the future direction of the firm, cultivating relationships with major clients, and identifying and grooming future firm leaders. To compensate for time lost from your personal practice, the job description should define your pay structure.

### **2) *Re-define the Role of Practice Group Chair.***

Practice group chairs are too often treated as lions among their prides. Often they are appointed because they are the senior member of the group, or the most effective rainmaker; not the most effective manager, or the best mentor, or the most committed to the success of the firm. Practice group chairs should be elevated to the level of senior management. They should be given the full authority to manage their groups. Practice group leaders need to be chosen based on the ability and the commitment to lead.

### **3) *Get to Know the Firm's Client Base Personally.***

No partner should "own" a key, institutional client. Managing partners should reach out to client contacts and underscore the message that the firm – the firm, not only their chosen counsel – are pleased to be of service. Ask the client for feedback; learn the client's business and the industry; strategize to help the client reach its goals. Do more for the firm's clients than simply put out fires.

### **4) *Identify and Hire a Strong Chief Operating Officer.***

If you are going to be an effective leader, or Chief Executive Officer, you have to get the minutiae off of your desk. Delegate day-to-day administrative responsibility to a strong, competent executive director or Chief Operating Officer. This person should head up a team of business professionals and serve as your trusted "second hand" on the leadership team.

### **5) *Offer Reforms to "Time & Money" Matters.***

You will be asking senior management to take on a more extensive and defined role in the operations of the firm. Adjust the time demands on the executive committee and the practice group leaders to allow for sufficient non-billable time for them to fulfill their management responsibilities. Likewise, adjust the compensation criteria for senior managers to acknowledge the time they must devote to management matters and for the firm-benefitting results that they achieve.

**6) *Start (or Re-energize) the Strategic Planning Process.***

A strategic plan is a living document that requires modification and fine-tuning from the first day it is implemented. If you have been selected as the firm's managing partner, presumably you have a vision of what you want the firm to become, what you want it to achieve. Sell this vision and muster a supporting coalition among the equity partners. You don't need to win them all over, but you will need an effective critical mass and working majority. With this group at your back, start small and keep the initial goals simple. We at the Managing Partner Forum suggest three or four one-year priority items with sufficient low-hanging fruit to show short-term wins. Consolidate your gains and move forward.

**7) *Maintain Your Firm's Investment in its Future.***

The challenges of launching new initiatives, creating consensus, and moving your firm forward can sometime cause a firm leader to forget about the "little things" that, in the end, may prove to be just as important as greater goals. Don't forget to implement a first-rate training and associate development program. Here lies the future of your firm. Don't forget about marketing and business development initiatives. These provide the growth that will finance your firm's future. Don't forget about technology upgrades. These are the essential tools that keep your firm on the cutting edge and ahead of the pack. And don't ignore your successor. Heirs apparent need the opportunity to learn the principles of law firm management.

The old Chinese proverb says that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Becoming a leader of a law firm is similar. A managing partner must, step-by-step, patiently bring along the uninterested and the doubters and the curmudgeons to join the advocates and the reformers. Bold vision and small steps are the stuff of leadership.

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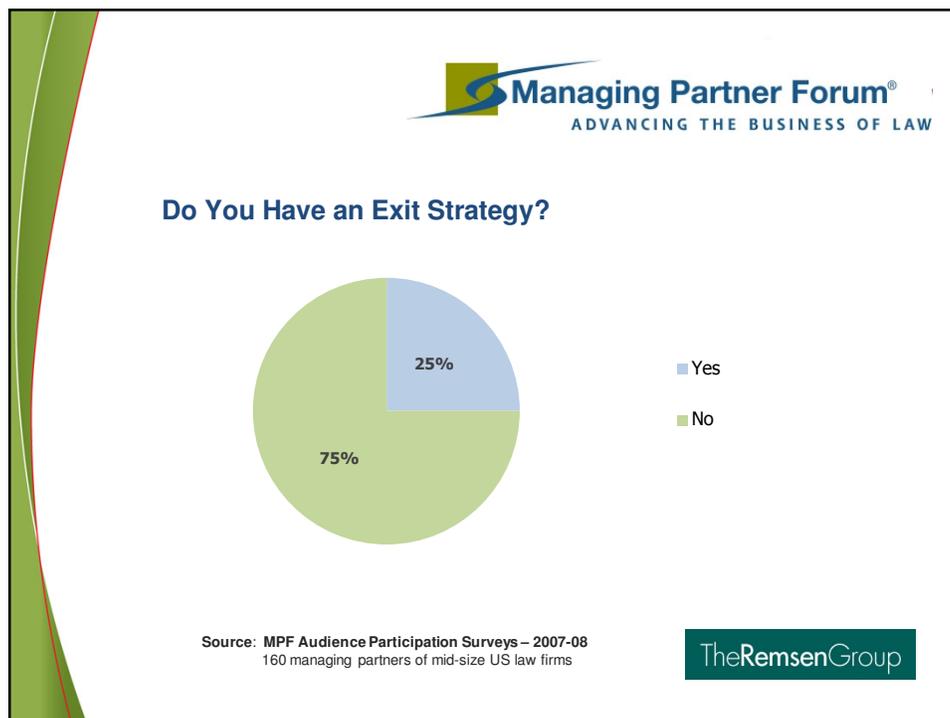
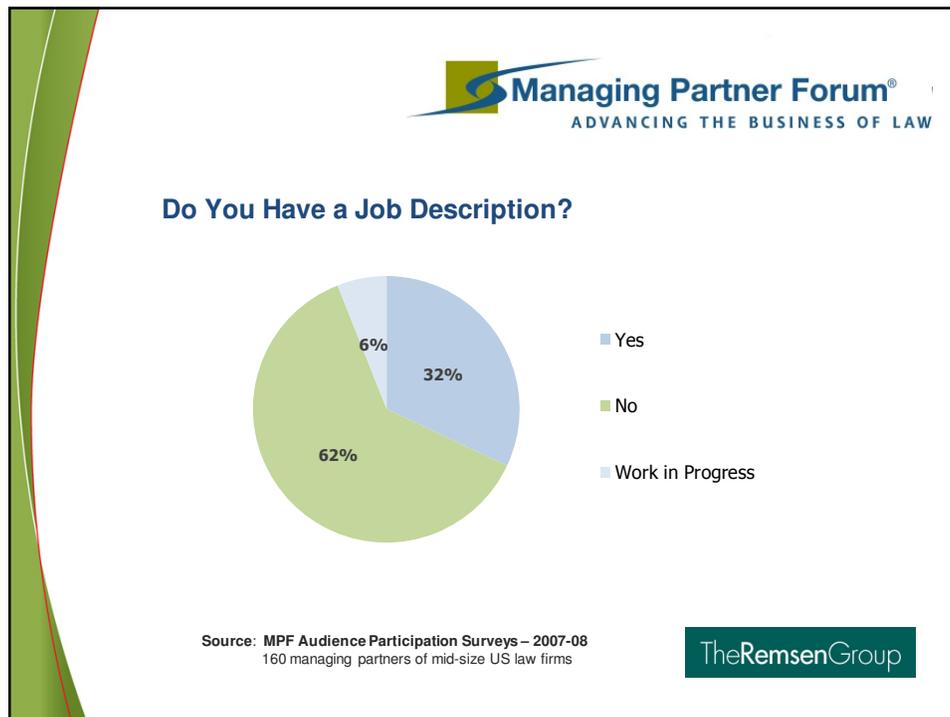
**About the Author**

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Audience Participation Survey Results - 2007-08

160 managing partners of mid-size US law firms



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