

Counseling New Firm Leaders

by Patrick J. McKenna

In addition to my semi-annual master class at the University of Chicago for new managing partners, I've increasingly been called upon to provide one-on-one counsel to those whose appointment dates do not coincide with the dates of our one-day program. While there are a couple of good books (like *First 90 Days* by Mike Watkins) that provide context for the first days in a new leadership role, many of these texts have been written from the prospective of a corporate (top down) environment and where the new leader is usually brought in from the outside. We all know that in a professional service firm, the situation is very different. Among a vast array of issues and challenges that [Brian Burke](#) (Chair Emeritus at Baker & Daniels) and I review in our one-day master class, here are a dozen quick tips for new leaders to reflect upon:

1. Prepare for some challenges you might not have expected.

Your first 100 days will pose some new job challenges for which you may feel ill-equipped to handle, such as: the need to build some new networks and forge new internal relationships while contending with having inherited a team of internal professionals (COO, CMO, HR, etc) that you do not fully understand; the risk of being overwhelmed with immediate 'firefighting' and partner-driven requests which serve to distract your attention from establishing the right strategic priorities; dealing with the legacy issues from your predecessor; and getting the balance right between moving too fast and moving too slow.

2. Fine-tune your listening system.

Spend time with individuals from across the firm. Let them know you are counting on them to fill you in on any important issues so you can be both more effective and more sensitive to people's perspectives. Let your partners know you need their input to be effective. Encourage them to identify issues that they believe need your attention, as long as they are not attacking or criticizing someone behind their back.

3. Develop your strategic agenda.

Write down what you consider to be the two or three most important priorities for you to focus your time on, over your first 100 days. When things get out of hand (and they will) and you are overwhelmed reacting to everyone placing demands on your time, revisit this list to remind yourself about what is most important.

4. Continually make "To-Do" lists.

It's a trivial technique but critically important – if you make a list of all the important things that you want to get accomplished, it serves to get them out of your head and you don't have to waste any further time thinking about them.

5. Prioritize your activities.

To feel a sense of control you should make it a regular habit to prioritize your responsibilities using the old A-B-C process. Your A's are those tasks that correspond with implementing your strategic agenda for the coming months, the B's are important but can wait; and the C's definitely need to be delegated to someone else.

6. Don't allow the urgent to crowd out the important.

Plan each day and plan your week. Check your daily schedule every morning before reading your e-mail. Preview your week on Sunday evening and preview your upcoming month's commitments a couple of days before the end of each month.

7. Get comfortable with discomfort.

Most of us think of anxiety as something to be avoided, but it can actually be fuel for positive change. Anxiety is that natural emotion that lives in the gap between where you are currently and what you want to achieve. Think of anxiety as your productive energy for moving forward.

8. Write your leadership memoir.

Pick a professional publication that will be meaningful to you if someone writes a cover story about you, your firm, and your accomplishments in three years. Write your 100-word memoir answering as many of these questions as possible:

- What was the firm like when you first became managing partner?
- What was your initial role?
- What is the specific set of accomplishments you hoped to achieve (in your competitive marketplace, inside the firm, with clients, et al)?
- What is the firm now positioned to do that it couldn't dream of doing when you became the leader?
- What have you changed and what have you preserved?
- What are the consequences for your partners in achieving that new set of capabilities or reputation?

If you do have yet have a good feel for your answers to these questions, then write a first draft and work to improve it over your first year in office.

9. Identify a few signals to project your leadership message.

Translate your priorities into quick, highly visible, tangible "signals" — some symbolic, some substantive, that convey to everyone what you believe to be most important. Start by defining what beliefs the people in your firm would need to hold in order to buy into the behaviors and performance that support your agenda; and then design and execute deeds — perform very visible signals that will begin to shape those beliefs.

Here is but one example:

Belief: "The managing partner doesn't really mean it when she says we are going to focus on better serving our key clients."

Signal: You develop a visible poster displaying the names of all of the top fifty clients of the firm for your office wall that allows you to identify in writing (and for all to see) which client CEO you have personally visited with, and on what date.

10. Know when to say “No.”

When you feel overwhelmed or sense that you are beginning to accumulate too much on your plate, you need to be able to say “No” without feeling guilty. That’s when good delegating practices can help. A great leader will always relinquish tasks that others can do so that you can focus on your highest value priorities.

11. When under stress call a time out.

Just like a basketball coach will call a time-out to slow down the pace of the game and regroup when the opposing team is on the run; you need to disengage in times of high emotion and reflect on your core values before proceeding any further. When you feel a tide of anger or frustration rising, leave the situation to retain your composure. Disengage; go for a walk, do a deep-breathing exercise, find some comfortable way to call your time out.

12. Find a trusted confidant.

Have you ever attempted to bench-press your maximum weight without having a spotter at your side to help out if anything were to go wrong? So too with the burden of leadership. Every successful leader has a confidant, at his or her side, that they can lean on in times of need.

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An internationally recognized authority on law practice management, **Patrick J. McKenna** is the author of two e-books important to law firm leaders: *First 100 Days: Transitioning A New Managing Partner* (NXTBooks, 2006) available for download from his web site (www.patrickmckenna.com) and the sequel, *Passing The Baton: The Last 100 Days* (Ark, 2008) – available from Ark Publishing or Amazon.com