

Successful Transitions: The New Managing Partner's First Days

by Patrick J. McKenna

Can anything really prepare you for those initial days in your new role as managing partner? Just when you feel that you have reached the peak of your career by building a successful practice, you may realize that you still have some things to learn. You also may face some real challenges settling into your new role.

How can a new firm leader make the most of this important transition period and avoid the potential pitfalls that can affect their ability to be successful over the long term? To find out, we interviewed a collection of new or soon to become managing partners of firms from across the country.

We talked to them about the importance of those first days, their priorities and challenges, and the advice they would give to someone taking over just such responsibilities. We chose firm leaders from a variety of firm sizes but were surprised to learn that in each and every case these leaders were partners in their firms for a minimum of 17 years and had served in some prior management capacity (practice group leader, office managing partner, executive committee member) for at least 5 years.

While some hold (or will hold) the title of Chair, President, Managing Director, or CEO the eight firm leaders we interviewed were:

David C. Baca, DAVIS WRIGHT TREMAINE
Frederick J. Baumann, ROTHGERBER JOHNSON & LYONS
Ira C. Kaplan, BENESCH FRIEDLANDER
Alan H. Maclin, BRIGGS and MORGAN
Richard D. Nix, McAFEE & TAFT
Michael B. Ray, STERNE, KESSLER, GOLDSTEIN & FOX
Maureen Weaver, WIGGIN AND DANA
Rich Zeidman, LINOWES AND BLOCHER

What were some of the most important things you learned from your prior leadership transitions (for example, when you became a practice group leader or began to serve on the Executive Committee)?

Ira Kaplan: As I am in a transition period that runs through '07, I have the luxury of looking back at my past position as a department chair and executive committee member and looking forward. I believe in the need to have an organized plan to accomplish one's goals and the discipline to carry out that plan. I also think that it is exceptionally important to communicate what your goals are and what actions you have taken and plan to take. And I guess consistent with setting and communicating goals is the importance of being direct with people as to how they are doing compared to expectations.

Richard Zeidman: I agree. I believe you need to be honest and direct with people; don't sugar coat the facts. Having said that, there is a fine line between being direct and being confrontational.

Dave Baca: For me, one of the important things I continue to remind myself of is the importance of listening. I find that I also have to constantly resist the pressure to deal with low priority but seemingly urgent matters.

Fred Baumann: I think that the most important learning for me is communication. Communication is fundamental to leading lawyers.

Alan Maclin: Each step up always takes more time than you anticipated and involves more meetings and issues than you realized exist. You don't know all the answers when you assume the position, and some of the answers you thought you knew aren't workable in the real world. You've got to be patient and listen. Thinking you can lead by dictating does not work. Things change. What worked for you, or your predecessor, in the past won't necessarily work tomorrow.

How important would you say, the Managing Partner's first 100 days are?

Dave Baca: Very . . . but more in the sense of setting expectations and having some initial successes, not in proclaiming a brave new world and dramatic new vision.

Mike Ray: The first 100 days are critical. I have found that I am being watched by people at all levels, including people with whom I have worked for over 17 years, to see how I will manage. I am getting a fair amount of feedback on my careful, consensus building decision-making. Decision-making in this manner is very time-consuming, but I feel that it is necessary at the beginning. Once credibility is established, I believe that I can adopt more efficient decision-making. I'm also seeing, after about two months, people starting to become more at-ease with the change.

Fred Baumann: I agree that the first several months are critical. I think that it's important to establish the right tone, as well as reassure your partners that you are "up to the job."

Alan Maclin: I think the first days are incredibly important. I have three new Board members and two new Executive Committee members. You might guess that there is a bit of firm-wide anxiety over new leadership. There is also an opportunity to re-direct and re-energize some areas that need it. In the first few weeks I think that it is critically important to gain the trust of the shareholders and the leadership; and let them feel comfortable with your style, ability and vision. You need their immediate trust to try to move your vision forward, and I think that if you don't work hard toward establishing that in the first 100 days, at a minimum, you've lost a huge opportunity.

Richard Zeidman: While I certainly don't disagree with what's been said, I think the first 100 days may be less important in a small firm like ours as management knows all the partners intimately well. And in our system, as managing partner elect for a year, the transition from elect to acting is probably a little "softer" landing.

Maureen Weaver: I agree with Richard. I think it depends on firm size, culture, length of transition period and the nature of the managing partner's responsibilities. For a firm like mine where the managing partner still practices 50% of the time, 100 days can go by very quickly. I see the first six months as more of a benchmark.

Richard Nix: I think that any change at the Managing Partner level will cause many of the legal and non-legal staff to sit-up and watch your early actions. By being prepared on the first day of the job you will instill confidence that as the new leader of the firm you are prepared for the challenges ahead.

Ira Kaplan: For my part, I have not experienced my first 100 days yet but I believe they are critical to setting the correct tone of trust among the partners, and perhaps also critical to showing a thoughtful agenda and process.

As you stepped up to become the new Managing Partner, what did you see as the challenges to be faced?

Richard Nix: My challenge, first and foremost, is to gain the confidence of the legal and non-legal staff in my new role as Managing Partner. They trusted me as a partner and as a board member. Now they elected me as their new Managing Partner – I need to show them their confidence in me for this new position is warranted.

Richard Zeidman: One of the challenges for any new leader is to clearly build consensus at management committee and then with the partnership to engineer any changes. As we all know, you cannot just mandate change, even in small things if the partners just say no. Absent external dynamics, incremental change for an old and successful firm like ours is an imperative. No one elected me to turn the firm on its head.

Alan Maclin: I'm seeing lots of new attorneys in leadership positions – a change of generations in charge. The firm has had a terrific run the past few years and there was a danger of complacency or skepticism of change. I think our Board has made it clear that we can't be complacent, and we need to get the shareholders' buy-in. Now, we need to grow and improve our marketing. We will have a number of senior attorneys retiring over the next few years and we need to plan for that transition.

Mike Ray: I saw my biggest challenge as establishing leadership credibility with a group of strong willed, skeptical, and risk-averse people, characteristics common in attorneys.

Fred Baumann: I think I had plenty of credibility from my prior service in firm management, so my challenge was to demonstrate that some changes could be made without damaging the firm's traditional character and culture.

Maureen Weaver: In our firm, we had an effective governance model in place and good management structure, so I saw my challenge as more strategic - - steering the firm towards real growth without sacrificing the character and culture of the institution.

Ira Kaplan: I'm in a similar situation. We have done exceptionally well during the term of our current managing partner and there is a significant success story to build upon. The challenge now is for me to set my own course while making it clear that we are going to build on what we have done well and continue to improve in the areas that are identified as our challenges.

Dave Baca: For me, it's first, getting a handle on the variety and detail of the issues being faced by the incumbent. Second, forming or confirming good relationships with key leaders within the firm—some formal, some not. And third, establishing an imprint on the

vision for the path of the firm, without underplaying past successes, since we have had many.

Have there been any surprises to this point in your tenure?

Maureen Weaver: Yes, but I assumed there would be. It's the nature of the job.

Fred Baumann: I suppose the biggest surprise is the amount of time it takes to do the job right. I have targeted a 60/40 ratio of client work to management time, and so far I have not even come close; it's been more 75/25 in favor of management. Hopefully, this will stabilize, but I think I underestimated the amount of time that needs to be devoted to management of the firm.

Mike Ray: I agree with Fred. I'm finding the job to be much more time consuming than I anticipated. I'm finding that much of my billable legal work must wait until evenings and weekends to get attention. This isn't good. I need to find more time to practice law. I also need to find more time to be proactive and plan.

I found a colleague's warning to "communicate, communicate, communicate . . . and when you think you've communicated enough, you haven't" very helpful. This colleague also commented that your intent is not relevant, what the recipient hears is all that matters. I have taken this to heart and have been very careful. And even then, I see the possible pitfalls of poor communication.

Richard Nix: I'm in total agreement. Managing and overseeing the day-to-day operations of the firm has been more time consuming than I had originally anticipated, but none of my time spent has felt "wasted." Everything I have done thus far is preparing me for the challenges ahead.

Dave Baca: For me, the quantity and quality of the issues that need to be faced or delegated by the managing partner was far more than I would have expected. There are a lot more, and they are far more intricate than I imagined—or that anyone who hasn't been doing the job could have imagined.

Alan Maclin: I agree. The number of requests for meetings and issues, both petty and major, that fall on the president's desk is amazing.

Richard Zeidman: A surprise for me was that what you say is not always what the partners hear and that constant reinforcement of the message by word and deed are critical. It's a bit like being on stage, you need to project in a manner that may be more exaggerated than in normal day to day intercourse with people.

Ira Kaplan: I'm seeing the same situation. There is a strong desire among people in the firm to see and talk to me and share ideas. My being accessible takes some time, but I do understand that the upside, in terms of trust building, is significant. I guess it is the small things that count. People do want you to succeed and if encouraged, seem to be open with their thoughts, both positive and constructively negative. Controlling expectations is also important so that there are no surprises.

From what you have learned, what advice would you offer to those about to go through a similar transition into some new leadership position?

Maureen Weaver: Three things come to mind. First, law firm and practice group management is a model based on inspiration, motivation and consensus. Change takes time, and ideas should not always be abandoned due to initial negative responses. Learn to accept that in a partnership on any one initiative there will always be some doubters and detractors.

Secondly, you need to assume that you will never accomplish all you set out to do in the first 100 days. Get comfortable with the need for flexibility, the need for refinements in your agendas and initiatives, and some delays in implementation.

And finally, practice group leaders and law firm managers make mistakes. It's important not to view those mistakes as setbacks, but to see them as opportunities for improvement.

Fred Baumann: I would recommend that you be open, listen well, and clearly communicate with each partner. And don't ignore the non-partner constituents, including associates and staff. They, too, are looking for assurance during a time of change that the firm is in capable hands.

Alan Maclin: My advice would be to be yourself. Don't have unrealistic expectations. Change won't come overnight, and you need firm buy-in for change.

Ira Kaplan: Make sure your partners see you as engaged and listening. Keep the lines of communication open. Begin a process with senior staff to get plugged in on a regular basis. Be prepared for how to deal with your people. They want honesty and clarity as to what goals are and what expectations are. Be prepared to make hard decisions and use your hired professional staff to help.

I think that it is very important to be organized, so that when meeting with people at the practice group level or otherwise, you use time productively and do not waste your partners' time. It is also important to have well conceived action items and dates for those items to be accomplished, so that your partners and staff know what is expected of them. From there, follow up is critical to convey the sense that what is being asked of people is meaningful and that they will be held accountable.

Dave Baca: The best advice I can offer is to get all you can from the current incumbent, and from those reporting to the incumbent.

Based on your own experience in making transitions into management / leadership positions and in observing others make those transitions, what are the most common traps into which new leaders fall, during their transitions?

Maureen Weaver:

Trap #1: especially for practice group leaders – not giving management of the practice group the appropriate priority and attention.

Trap #2: letting inevitable crises and unexpected events become the management agenda and excuse failure to move ahead strategically.

Richard Zeidman:

Trap #1: over eager to push a mandate that no one voted for

Trap #2: arrogance

Trap #3: don't listen to the advice of your attorneys and don't build consensus as to new ideas

Dave Baca:

Trap #1: accepting the way we've always done it without examination

Trap #2: acting or reacting too quickly

Trap #3: worrying too much about consensus to avoid conflict

Mike Ray:

Trap #1: make grand plans that you don't have the time to complete

Trap #2: get caught-up in minutia

Trap #3: try to do too much with too little delegation

Fred Baumann:

Trap #1: repeating what has been done in the past – just because it has been done that way before.

Trap #2: not finding a 'signature issue'

Ira Kaplan:

Trap #1: failing to make hard decisions quickly enough

Trap #2: that planning is difficult, time consuming and cannot be put off

Alan Maclin:

Trap #1: trying to take on too much and getting overwhelmed

Trap #2: balancing management and leadership with billable work responsibilities is difficult

Trap #3: trying to make too many significant changes too quickly

How can a new Managing Partner best add value in the first 100 days?

Mike Ray: The first 100 days is for calming fears and anxiety and establishing lines of communication. During this time it is important to listen and think. It is also important to begin moving forward your signature issue. I think it will be very important at the end of the first year to show good progress on at least one important issue, coupled with a pattern of good communication and responsiveness on other issues.

Fred Baumann: I agree. I believe it starts with picking one or two things to do differently, and making sure that the substantial majority of your partners see those changes as making a positive difference.

Dave Baca: I definitely think that real value comes from not let anything get out of hand. You need to establish a compelling personal vision, which need not be much changed, of the firm and its future, and then have some initial successes - which need not be life changing, but should be noticeable.

Ira Kaplan: I think the suggestions that a "small" plan be conceived of and implemented so as to create a couple of wins in short order is very important. I agree with that completely. I

believe that building trust during the first 100 days and being visible is important. I believe that communicating with attorneys and staff is very important. Creating the sense that the business will not miss a beat is paramount. Creating the belief that this change will not create other disruptive changes merely for the sake of change, is critical as well. And then creating the quick impression of strength is critical.

Alan Maclin: Pick good leaders to work on the team. Spend lots of time in discussion with key attorneys and leaders in selecting a few very important goals that can make a difference. Learn from your predecessor and from speaking with other managing partners at other law firms.

Richard Nix: Simple – be prepared, as much as possible, from day one.

Richard Zeidman: Patience and in addition to everything that has already been said, follow the medical principal "First do no harm."

Maureen Weaver: Let's not forget that the real "first 100 days" are the 100 days *before* you take over as managing partner. You can best add value by starting during the transition period to communicate informally and formally with partners, non-lawyer managers and the firm generally and by preparing key priorities and initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Any new firm leader needs to be skillful in analyzing and assessing the issues, the business drivers, the infrastructure and the resources of their firm, and identifying appropriate solutions and communicating those solutions effectively. Of course, nobody is ready to be a managing partner superstar the day he or she steps into the job. The post is far too difficult, no matter how skilled the professional may be. In effect, our interviewees are confirming that the job has become more time-consuming, complex, international, technology-related, client-centric and engaged with profitability issues than ever before.

The responses from our interviewees also indicate that preparing for those first 100 days as the new managing partner is extremely important, and being clear about your objectives will improve the chances for your success.

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Author of First Among Equals (The Free Press), and one of the profession's foremost authorities on practice leadership, Patrick's latest e-book First 100 Days: Transitioning A New Managing Partner (NXTBook) earned glowing reviews and has been read by firm leaders in 63 countries. This interview follows from his successful one-day intensive MasterClass for new Managing Partners.

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

- **David C. Baca, - DAVIS WRIGHT TREMAINE, Seattle, WA**

Dave served as co-chair of the corporate securities department, chair of the compensation committee, and on the firm's executive and quality assurance committees. He worked on the transition from December 15, becoming managing partner on April 13, 2007

- **Frederick J. Baumann - ROTHGERBER JOHNSON & LYONS, Denver, CO**

Fred, a senior trial lawyer, was formerly loss prevention counsel for the firm, and a member of the executive committee for 10 years. He was appointed managing partner in November 2006, and scheduled to assume office effective January 1, 2007.

- **Ira Kaplan - BENESCH FRIEDLANDER, Cleveland, OH**

Ira currently serves as the associate managing partner and is scheduled to take over as managing partner in January 2008.

- **Alan Maclin - BRIGGS and MORGAN, Minneapolis MN**

Alan served on the firm's executive committee for 5 years, was chair of the litigation department and a member of the board of directors. He began his transition into the new role as president in August 2006, and became president on February 13, 2007.

- **Richard D. Nix - McAFEE & TAFT, Oklahoma City, OK**

Richard is the former practice leader of the firm's employee benefits group and served on the firm's board of directors for seven years before assuming the role of managing director on February 1, 2007.

- **Michael B. Ray – STERNE, KESSLER, GOLDSTEIN & FOX, Washington DC**

Mike was elected managing director in December 2006 (effective April 2, 2007) while serving both as a practice group leader and a member of the firm's executive committee. Mike's election is part of the firm's succession from a founder's firm. He is working very closely with the current managing director who serves as his mentor.

- **Maureen Weaver - WIGGIN AND DANA, New Haven, Connecticut**

Maureen became chair of Wiggin and Dana's executive committee on September 5, 2006. She has been a member of the executive committee since 2002 and is the former chair of the firm's health care department.

- **Richard Zeidman, - LINOWES AND BLOCHER, Bethesda, MA**

Richard currently serves on the firm's management committee and is the head of the firm's real estate transactional practice. He will assume the role of managing partner effective as of January 1, 2008.