

In The Footsteps Of A Successful Predecessor

QUESTION:

I was elected as the new managing partner of our 80-lawyer, one office firm effective at the beginning of April. My predecessor had been the firm's leader for some 15 years. I was naturally thrilled with the confidence my partners seemed to have in me. I've become dismayed to now discover that many of those same partners continually tell me about how great my predecessor was. At first, I brushed it aside as just me feeling a bit insecure. But it has now been a month and I'm starting to wonder what I should be doing to counter having such a tough act to follow. I would be most grateful to hear your group's suggestions and ideas.

RESPONSE:

We have several thoughts about your inquiry. First, one month is a very short time compared to the roughly fifteen years that your predecessor devoted to the leadership role in your firm. You have not yet fully (or perhaps even initially) established yourself among your partners as their leader. That they chose you says that they have great confidence in you, but it is up to you to show that you are worthy of their trust and confidence. It will take time for you to do so. During your tenure as leader, you will demonstrate to your partners, and the entire firm, your own values, vision, philosophy, and leadership style, all of which will be unique to you.

Second, it is natural and understandable that your partners would admire your predecessor. Over fifteen years, it is likely that he gained their trust and confidence. We suggest that you join with them in celebrating his successes and stature within the firm. Your partners' comments about your predecessor also offer the opportunity for you to ask what it was about your predecessor that inspired their positive assessments. Listening to your partners' responses probably will offer insight into what your partners value in, and expect of, their leader. Indeed, during your early days in office, we suggest that you devote substantial amounts of time to seeking out your partners to learn their views about the firm and its future and about your role as the firm's leader. The more that you ask your partners for their views and really listen to them, the more accepting and trusting of you they are likely to be. Also, please understand that listening will be an essential function of the leadership role throughout your tenure. After 30 days or so in the job, you have heard only a small fraction of what is on your partners' minds.

Third, there is potential advantage to you that flows from your predecessor's standing—your partners appear to accept the need for leadership and to value leadership when they see it. You can build on this foundation of goodwill toward the leadership role. Remember, however, that leaders are judged in significant measure based on results, and that is how your partners are likely to judge your performance.

Fourth, lawyers are notoriously change-averse, so please understand that your partners might be reacting to the leadership change that has occurred within your firm with the understandable inclination to celebrate the past.

Fifth, your predecessor can be your best ally. You and he are not (or shouldn't be) in competition with each other. If you have not done so already, cultivate his support and assistance.

Optimally, you and he should resolve always to exhibit support for each other among your colleagues. Your predecessor's support can discourage naysayers among your partners.

Your predecessor's agreement to step back from and remain silent about potentially controversial leadership decisions also would be beneficial to you in your new position, especially during the early months when your partners will be watching you to gauge what kind of leader you will be.

Sixth, although thoughts diverge on the subject of the most important traits of effective leaders, there is wide support for the view that self-interest is antithetical to effective leadership. Good leaders understand that they must act in the best interests of those whom they lead, and not in their own self-interest. They also understand that they cannot expect to receive credit for the job they have done. Indeed, the effective leader shares credit, or more often, assures that others receive credit for successes. This point is intended to manage your expectations. Even if you perform superbly as the firm's managing partner, recognition of your performance might not fully mature (if it ever does) until your predecessor is listening to the positive comments that your partners are making about you.

Finally, keep your sense of balance. Your partners' views about your predecessor are not meant as criticisms of you. Comparisons of you with your predecessor are inevitable; receive them with good humor.

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