

## **Six Factors That Can Impede Effective Firm Leader-COO Relationships**

by Patrick J. McKenna

Earlier this month I had the opportunity to participate in presenting at a Webinar entitled The Firm Leader-COO Team: A Sensitive Balancing Act in Shared Responsibility. One of the questions that was asked by the registrants was this one:

*What are the danger signs and which factors greatly impede the development of an effective Firm Leader-COO working relationship?*

Here was my response.

One needs to keep in mind that the Firm Leader-COO team, in a sense, is two people who have been forced to work together – rather than having chosen the arrangement voluntarily. That is not intended to be pejorative, but the reality is that a COO inevitably finds him or herself with a brand new boss while at the same time, some new Firm Leader realizes that they now have to work closely with an individual whom they may even know very well. We shouldn't lose sight of that. So there are any number of factors that can make this “forced marriage” rather challenging, if they are not conscientiously addressed.

From my observations and in speaking with Managing Partners and COOs whom I have a great deal of regard for, at the top of my list would be:

### **• RESPECT**

There is always a tension between two strong individuals. So, these two individuals not having great respect for one another is deadly. And what I specifically mean by the term “respect” is:

Firstly, giving each other the benefit of the doubt; especially during those “why did he or she do that?” moments. No matter how well you choose to communicate with one another, there are going to be those times when something goes side-ways and you didn't have the chance to forewarn your colleague. Those are the times when you don't jump to judgment, but extend the benefit of the doubt.

Secondly, respect is appreciating each other's contributions. I sometimes hear from the COO who works through the night and tells me, “no one ever says thanks.” The tragedy is that management / leadership is a thankless job and especially challenging for the attorney who becomes the Firm Leader but is used to seeing results at the end of the day based on progressing their individual client matters. Now you are in some management role and at the end of the day, you go home and your spouse says, “so, what did you accomplish today?” And you quickly realize that in day-to-day management work, you don't always have a lot to report, because some of your most important initiatives take months, maybe years to progress. So helping each other find ways to hear ‘thank you’

becomes intensely appreciated.

Finally, respect is being committed to helping each other's careers or making each other look good. A case in point happened last month when Law360 announced the winners of their 2012 Most Innovative Managing Partners Award, naming ten firm leaders from across the U.S. That announcement was followed by sequential interviews during the month with each of those individuals. One of the firm leaders identified was Ben Adams at Baker Donelson in Memphis. Now anyone who knows that firm, knows the leadership team of Ben & Jerry. And as I would have expected, and was not surprised, Ben did not feature in this interview without multiple references to the work and contribution that Jerry makes. And so it is and should be when the leadership duo truly respects one another. Others have used the metaphor of having one's back. Alternatively, if the firm leader is perceived by the partners to be negative about the COO, and the COO then goes out to take action on some issue (let's say, tightening controls), partners may simply choose to ignore the COO because the individual has lost some credibility in their eyes.

### • **ROLE CLARITY**

In my experience, one of the greatest sources of stress between the Firm Leader and COO is role clarity – ambiguity about who is in charge of what.

For example, which of the duo should take the lead with respect to:

- translating firm strategy into organizational policies and procedures?
- setting performance targets?
- helping the practice groups develop their annual business plans?
- resolving critical shared-resources issues?
- handling interpersonal conflicts between partners and staff?
- and so forth.

The greater the overlap, the greater the likelihood of friction in the relationship between the duo. The Firm Leader may feel that the COO is sticking his nose into areas where it doesn't belong; and the COO feels that the Firm Leader is micro-managing his every move.

There needs to be very explicit and reasonable lines of demarcation between the Firm Leader and COO's responsibilities. Both members of this duo need to figure out who is going to be doing what and who needs to check in with whom on key decisions.

And that all sounds like a no-brainer – except for one small problem. My research clearly indicates that only 27% of Firm Leaders, from firms of every size, have a formal written job description. Meanwhile, I have confirmed, for myself at least (repeatedly) that most partners haven't the foggiest idea of the enormity of the Firm Leader's job – and so we shouldn't be surprised if they know about as much concerning the enormity of the COO's responsibilities.

## • ABILITY TO COMPROMISE

The real glue that sustains the team and can be torn to tatters is – the inability or willingness to reach a compromise in cases when the Firm Leader and COO have differences of opinion; where they have divergent views.

I believe you definitely need some pre-agreed process, protocols or ground rules in place that allows for open debate and collaborative decision-making. It is critical that you both talk through and determine how to listen and entertain views contrary to your own and how to resolve any disagreements when they arise.

What I heard from one firm leader who claimed to have addressed this situation was: “If one of us feels very passionate about the issue, more so than the other one, we’ll say, “Fine, you want to do it that way, then I’ll go along.”

Sometimes, such yielding is uncharacteristic of the personality that occupies the firm leader’s office – so you have to figure out how you are going to handle it if that is the case.

## • CANDID FEEDBACK

The relationship can be impeded when the COOs does not serve the role of truth teller.

The relationship will eventually run into problems if the COO does not tell the Firm Leader the “unvarnished” truth about what is working and what isn’t working and what issues are looming. The COO must also be allowed and encouraged to push back on the Firm Leader by testing assumptions and disagreeing when necessary.

I recently heard from one Managing Partner who gave his COO two playing cards – one was a Joker (which he called the imagination card) and the other the Ace of Hearts (a trump card). He told the COO to play the imagination card if “this is something that I know you are not really going to be that fond of, but I really want to do.” And to trump something that “I (the Firm Leader) am set on doing, but where you (the COO) strongly feel that I would be making a mistake.”

That all said, this leadership duo may disagree behind closed doors, but in front of the partnership . . . you must always present a unified front.

## • DIVIDE-AND-CONQUER

The relationship can be impeded when you allow yourselves to be divided-and-conquered. In other words, there needs to be a purposeful effort to ensure that no administrative professional your CFO, CMO, HR Director, and so forth) ever reports to both the Firm Leader and the COO. It is important to avoid any potential for confusion.

Administrative professionals should not be seen “shopping” their pet projects around, and they should never be allowed to play you off against one another by asking the Firm Leader for something after the COO has already said no.

## • POOR PERFORMANCE

Finally, poor performance results – tends to strain even the strongest relationships and easily break the weak ones as the pressure increases.

One important element of your communications protocol is that you should never be ‘surprised’ by news; particularly bad news. It must be the desire of both to keep the other fully informed of issues and potential issues that relate to your firm’s performance and leadership.

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