

Building An Environment of Trust

QUESTION:

As someone who is about to become this firm's newest managing partner, my predecessor identified one challenge that he immediately confronted when he took office. The issue is, after you become the firm leader, how do you get a good grasp of people's candid views, especially when it sometimes seems like all of your partners, and indeed the whole firm, is conspiring to tell you what you want to hear? In other words, how do you ferret out the truth when well meaning partners edit themselves, your administrative staff are not naturally inclined to disagree with you, and the information you receive is, so often, being filtered?

RESPONSE:

Your question implicates many of the most fundamental issues with which a law leader must deal.

Open communication is based on trust. The managing partner must set the tone for an environment of trust by being worthy of trust and conducting himself in ways that demonstrate that he is worthy of trust.

Assuring that there are people within the firm who will "speak truth to power" is another important ingredient. In most firms, there are at least two or three members of the governing body within the firm (executive committee, management committee, or board) on whom the managing partner can rely for candid input and feedback. Senior members of the firm's staff also can function in this role. An executive director who is willing to speak candidly with the managing partner is a rare and valuable resource. Cultivate these "truth speakers" to reinforce with them that their candor is invaluable to your performing your role.

Openness and accessibility will promote more effective communication. Resist the temptation to remain in your office. Get out and about within the firm. Visit other offices and with members of staff. In some firms, managing partners hold informal gatherings of partners or associates to receive input. Ask your colleagues, lawyers and staff alike, for their views on matters of interest or importance to the firm.

The next point is critical: Listen to what your colleagues say to you. Nothing will shut down a channel of communication faster than a leader who appears disinterested or distracted when others are speaking their minds. Good listening on your part will prompt others to be more forthcoming with their views. Sometimes, it is desirable to follow up with questions and to probe to assure that you are receiving the whole story. Following up with questions—one form of this is called "active listening"—demonstrates that you are engaged and interested in what the speaker is saying to you. Be thoughtful about the questions that you ask; they can affect what you hear. Focusing on an individual's point of view might work well for some, while asking

about what others in the firm appear to be thinking might work for others. Asking colleagues to comment about an idea or program under consideration by the firm's leadership can encourage some colleagues to share their views.

Take care to understand and place in context what you hear from others within the firm. Be wary of generalizations — "everybody opposes this measure," or "no one wants to open an office in Lapland." These generalizations often are no more general than the personal perspective of the speaker or of those with whom the speaker associates. Also, understand that some comments imparted to you will be more thoughtfully developed than others. Some will be products of the moment, representing a "top of mind" reaction and not products of deep thinking or persistent conditions. Again, questioning the speaker will promote better understanding of the basis for the communication and will reinforce your openness to the views of others. In short, develop the skill of "reading between the lines."

We suggest that you consciously promote diversity of opinion within the firm. Look for opportunities to receive input from those whom you know or suspect hold contrarian views. Encourage others to disagree with you. This is particularly important within the firm's governing body. The leader isn't always right. Be willing to change your mind when another perspective is more persuasive than your own. This is not a sign of weakness, but rather a manifestation of confidence. Accepting and adopting others' views when appropriate will validate to others the importance of speaking up and expressing contrary views.

Be discrete and keep the confidences of your colleagues. Open communication with the firm's leader will be severely inhibited if confidences that colleagues impart to the managing partner are communicated throughout the firm. Keeping confidences can be lonely, but disclosing confidences, even in the process of consulting with others for advice, can be destructive.

Take advantage of a "honeymoon" period as the firm's new leader. Some channels of communication, such as with associates and staff, might be more open to you in your early tenure than after you've served in the role for multiple years.

Finally, understand that leadership can be a lonely role and that effective communication can become more challenging the longer that one serves in the leadership role. Be attentive throughout your tenure to building and maintaining healthy relationships within the firm that will be the sources of effective communication. These relationships will evolve and change over time, but it is essential that you have them.

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The LAB was formed as a resource to provide pragmatic advice to assist new managing partners with their critical burning issues and help them succeed. **The LAB** is comprised of the following distinguished current and former law firm leaders: Angelo Arcadipane (Dickstein Shapiro LLP); John Bouma (Snell & Wilmer LLP); Brian K. Burke (Baker & Daniels LLP); Ben F. Johnson, III (Alston & Bird LLP); Keith B. Simmons (Bass Berry

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