When The Urgent Displaces The Important

QUESTION:

I've just taken on the leadership of our firm (what great timing I have); and indeed that is at the heart of my question as I'm also desperately trying to maintain a bit of a legal practice over the next four years (my term in office). I'm not sure whether it is simply a result of the economic doldrums we are all in, but I have been just overwhelmed by the office drop-bys, the desire my partners have to chat, the requests for one-on-one meetings, and the sheer demands on my time. I am sincerely hoping that this will taper off over the next few months, but conscious that I need to set a rhythm and manage people's expectations – if that is possible. Please tell me that you have some valuable tips for me; techniques that you have used and that I could employ to better get a handle on the time I need to spend managing this place.

RESPONSE:

The reality is, that as a new managing partner, you are going to spend a lot more nights and weekends working, than you ever have before. The consensus among our group is that most started in the role feeling as you do, that one should preserve their practice. While that is an admirable aspiration, anything beyond a few hundred billable hours will see you feeling as if you are working two full-time jobs, with a lot of the client work getting done at night and on weekends. Thus, managing your precious time becomes imperative.

Now to exasperate the situation, with today's economic doldrums it should not be surprising that there would be more "office drop-bys" than usual. Your partners likely have both more time on their hands and may even have concerns about the state of the firm – so you might not want to limit their access. (One managing partner in our group had an assistant who once suggested that he could construct a glass partition strategically located outside his office so as to prohibit access by unannounced visitors. He reports that he can pretty much guarantee that he would not have lasted his 12 years as the firm leader, had he adopted that suggestion.)

We suspect that a lot of what you may be experiencing is your partners trying to get a feel for your views. You should approach each of these discussions with a mindset of – expecting to be "worked" in each conversation, needing to listen more and say less, avoiding the making of any early commitments that you may not be able to deliver on, and expressing your understanding for their concerns and appreciation for their taking the time.

In the early going of your tenure as managing partner, it is good that your colleagues are dropping by to talk with you. This process will be one of the best means for you to understand what is on their minds. In fact, you might want to consider being more proactive in your initial days and rather than waiting for them to drop-by, conduct a listening tour of the firm and tap the views of ***all*** of your partners. In the *First 100 Days* program offered for new managing partners, it is strongly recommended that new firm leaders identify a number of questions to pose to partners in the firm, and that you basically pose the same questions to all partners. This process can serve to provide you with some profound insights on the views of various partners, their respective 'appetites for change,' and assist you in developing your strategic agenda going forward.

Over time, these drop-bys likely should diminish in frequency. Nevertheless, you do need a good secretary or assistant who can help you with scheduling. If you have one, than you can always ask people to check with your assistant as to when might be best to meet, whether one-on-one or with a group. If you generally eat lunch, you can begin to train your partners to schedule a luncheon meeting, or for breakfast or perhaps even a meeting over a drink after work.

If there is one certain partner who keeps coming by "just to chat," you may need to use a different tactic. When this habitual socializer drops by, step out of your office to speak to him or her if at all possible. This will send the message that things need to be kept short and sweet. Some partners can more persistent than others and just don't get it. You may have to set some boundaries. Make it clear that while you value your relationship with them, you'd rather socialize at a different time.

It is advisable that you try to block out some time when you are not available for firm matters. When you do that, try to work from home or some other off-site location, because if you are in the office, you will be tempted to talk to whoever wants to confer with you. The idea is to get people to respect your time, to gently let them know that you too have commitments and obligations, and that you can't drop everything and be available every time some partner feels like dropping in. If a partner should interrupt you in the middle of something timely, unless their issue is absolutely critical you can always postpone meeting, by offering to get together as soon as you are free. In fact, one important tip for holding any meeting with a colleague is to meet with them in ***their*** office. That will allow you to better control the timing and duration of the meeting.

With those partners that get into your office without an important issue that warrants discussion, a good assistant will know when to buzz in and remind you of some client commitment, real or improvised. It is important for you to think through and develop a courteous way to end conversations and to excuse yourself.

There will always be those things that do warrant discussion without delay. People are going to come to you with all kinds of problems in the early going. In some instances, you have to turn your attention to them promptly and do whatever is necessary. In many other instances the problems that your partners feel are important and want to discuss with you, will often resolve themselves, assume less importance, or simply go away if put off a little by scheduling the meeting even later in the same day. In other words, you don't need to concern yourself with solving every problem. On other occasions the problem or issues go away with the telling. Lawyers are very verbal people. Many times we think through problems, by talking them through. Talking through a problem with your partner, who is also a verbal person, can be very time-consuming. Try to observe how much time you consume unnecessarily with your own ramblings. You have to listen, but you may not always need to invest yourself in the solution.

One of the things you do need to be sensitive to is to discourage pure gripe sessions. You need to make it clear (over time and in an appropriate way) that complaints without thoughtful suggestions are not a productive use of time. Gripes and complaints are generally not worth the effort it takes to stay and listen to them, as contrasted to a discussion of alternative solutions to actual problems and issues. One of your challenges is to train your partners to understand that if they have a problem, they should not "drop it on" you, until they also have a suggested strategy or course of action.

Today you are caught in a tidal wave of 24/7 communications from partners and clients to react instantaneously to requests. In order to be effective you must make choices about where to spend your time. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the information, messages and projects you are involved with each day. Being effective requires that you have some form of filter to sift through the ever-increasing list of to dos to determine which are of the highest priority. Here are some important principles that you need to keep in mind:

Focus on the Wildly Important. As a new managing partner you need to get very clear and realistic about your strategic priorities. Giving your attention to each and every item that crosses your desk and each and every individual that enters your office means dissipating your attention and soon your sense of what is most important. In your first year, you cannot realistically hope to advance more than a couple of significant initiatives – so what are yours? This means you need to narrow your focus down to the one, two or (at most) three most important priorities you must achieve. These are so important that if you don't achieve them, nothing else you achieve really matters much.

Assess your progress every week. After you've narrowed your focus to the few key priorities you must accomplish, you need to select the few key activities that are predictive of results and that you can influence on a weekly basis. Write them down. Look at them at the conclusion of every week and ask yourself, "How did what I'm was spending time on this week help to advance any of my important priorities?"

Decide what not to do. If you start getting drawn into something "urgent," take a step back and ask yourself, "What is the highest-value use of my time? How important will this be six months down the road?" Stop kidding yourself about your capacity to take on more responsibility and give yourself the freedom to say "no." Start with a clear calendar and for each thing you add, you should be able to identify the strategic priorities it supports. If you cannot readily make the connection between a given task and one of your key priorities, drop it off your list.

Delegate more effectively. Too many managing partners take on partner problems that others in their firms – notably the practice group leaders – should be taking responsibility for handling. Any time a partner brings you some issue, ask yourself, "Is this really something that I need to be involved with?" Engage others to help you get things done. Challenge yourself to understand if you are truly the best person to complete a given task. Ask two or three of your partners who have good listening skills and reporting skills to assist in particular areas and empower them to take on some of the responsibility. Once it is clear that the delegates have been empowered by you, people will gradually get used to talking to others. This is also a good way to help start preparing those of your partners who may be seen as potential leadership successors in the years to come.

Surround yourself with a good team. Select people who understand your goals, whom you can trust, and who have the ability to help you get things done. They need to be your people. People on whom you know you can rely upon without question. If you do not have strong non-lawyer administrative people, pay the price and hire them, because good administrative people make a huge difference.

Make time to reflect. Set aside some time, even if it's just half an hour each day, when you turn off the Blackberry and let the calls go to voicemail. Schedule time in your calendar to think and prepare. A common mistake we see is firm leaders scheduling back-to-back meetings with little or no free blocks to process information, make notes or compare other data. The result is that, by the end of the day, everything is a blur. All of your discussions and activities run together in your head.

And some critical time-management philosophies to work from

1. do not spend 80% of your communications time on either the bottom 20% or a lot of people who cannot help move the firm forward - some people are just not worth much time - and you shouldn't feel bad about that;

2. do program yourself to affirmatively communicate with those you need to help you get things done;

3. use communications time, no matter how it started, to return to some themes you need to influence (no hard sell, but you can get input) or try out ideas, or sell a little - "while you are here , let me run this by you . . ." or some such; and

4. set boundaries concerning:
   • explicit limit time: " how long do you need"; "I've got X minutes now - and Y minutes later" etc.
   • what you will or can deal with and what they should talk to someone else about: the computer glitch or holiday scheduling may be someone else's job
   • communicate outside of business hours if necessary to allow you to do your work: " . . . I will call you at home tonight/ this weekend – and if they say that is not convenient then you know how important the matter is to them
   • the medium used: sometimes, but not always- email works - e.g. - can you send me an email on that, so I can think about it and get back to you? The advantage is they may have to think through what they want to say and be clearer and shorter at the front end; disadvantage - no body language
   • managing your partner's expectations: a general communication to your partners about your desire to balance your MP role with your practice - which you know is what they want and your gratitude for their using your time effectively - while being clear you welcome their input.

Finally, throughout your tenure, we recommend that you maintain a regular means for checking in with your firm's partners. For example, if the issue that most of your colleagues seem to want to discuss currently is the economy, or the economic situation within the firm, you should schedule a meeting from time to time and give all of your people the benefit of whatever information is available, and an opportunity to add their thinking. Another technique is to announce Partner Discussion lunches several days each month where folks could come and talk with firm leaders about issues of the day. This structures the discussion for those who think they really need information, allows you to talk to groups rather than individuals, and lets the folks who really don't care, know they have a venue if they start to crave information about anything. Some of your partners simply want to be assured that you are on top of a particular situation, and being proactive with an 'all partners meeting' can resolve any concern.

Setting priorities for how you will use your time is a challenge for all new managing partners. Discipline yourself to prevent the mundane from overwhelming the critical. That said, in order to be effective you should expect that your role as managing partner will require much more time than you might have initially predicted.

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); John R. Sapp (Michael Best & Friedrich LLP); Keith B. Simmons (Bass Berry & Sims PLC); William J. Strickland (McGuire Woods LLP); Harry P. Trueheart, III (Nixon Peabody LLP); together with Patrick J. McKenna