

# The Management IMPERATIVE

BY GERRY RISKIN • EDGE INTERNATIONAL

A leader can be forgiven for doing the wrong thing on occasion but what about failing to manage at all? In a corporate setting, this would be perceived as abdication and likely result in dismissal.

In many law firms, however, leaders are excused from their management responsibilities. They simply have to mention the important legal work they are doing for a significant client and they can miss meetings and fail to follow through on almost any management initiative. Even in enlightened firms where the managing partner has minimal or no client responsibilities, the practice group leaders and department heads usually continue to carry major client loads and therefore fall prey to the same syndrome.

So the summary goes like this: in most law firms the “CEO” (Managing Partner) spends too much time on the shop floor making the widgets, not fulfilling a leadership role. In those firms where the “CEO” actually does lead, the question is, “leading whom”? Even if the “CEO” isn’t consumed with the making of widgets then you can bet the “VP’s” are (VP’s in this case being the practice and industry group leaders and perhaps department heads).

A partnership cannot appreciate the cost of the absence of de facto management until it understands what effective management can (and should) achieve.

At the highest level of abstraction, management is about getting peak performance from people who are harmoniously striving to achieve personal and firm-enhancing objectives. In a managed firm, individuals are understood so well that their leader finds synergy between personal aspirations and firm success and manages people accordingly. This is no different from what symphony orchestra conductors or sport team coaches do.

Management creates a learning culture where knowledge is not fragmented and lost but organized and harnessed.



Synergistic teams are assembled to attract ever-better work and to enhance the quality and value of the service offerings. Management ensures that the firm is healthy enough to adequately compensate individuals and, beyond that, create an environment that fosters appreciation and respect to create glue that transcends compensation. Management encourages innovation that yields more effective and efficient practices.

Why then do we tolerate the absence of meaningful management in most firms? Because...

- Legal work is perceived as being more important than management;
- Fear that management is an excuse to produce less;
- Lawyers are ferociously independent and resist being managed;

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- Critical and analytical thinking negates most progressive ideas;
- There is no time to execute the ideas that survive the debates.

Then what, pray tell, might a firm do to ensure that it managed effectively? Here is the beginning of a checklist for your consideration:

- Ensure that the managing partner has no client responsibilities, or;
- If the managing partner is concerned about returning to active practice after serving, then legislate that the managing partner's client activities be limited to a pre-determined level but in no case more than 1/2 of the billable hour target of the average partner;
- Create minimum management-focused non-billable hour targets for practice group leaders and industry group leaders (absolute minimum 300 hours per year);

The allocation of time for management is necessary but not sufficient. The operative ingredient is the willingness of the managing partner to actually manage and this means setting objectives against which performance can be measured. The managing partner must "manage the managers." Indicia that the managing partner is actually managing include the following:

- Getting to know the practice group and industry group leaders in terms of their personal aspirations as well as their views about the firm's potential and how their respective groups might contribute;
- Interactively setting customized objectives with practice group and industry group leaders for their respective groups;
- Agree on sensible expectations of each practice group and industry group leader in terms of the difference they will make to the group each leads;
- Meeting informally with practice group and industry group leaders to ask how they are progressing, to provide ideas, perhaps options, and to offer help;

- Ensure that leaders are delegating to members of their respective groups and/or to support professionals in the firm so that the progress of the group is not limited to the time resources of the leader—also to ensure that the leaders delegate matters where they lack personal aptitude or desire. For example, some leaders are reluctant to coach their individuals but have others in their groups who are well suited to the task;

- Replace practice group and industry group leaders who fail to perform (or worse, who passively sabotage firm efforts).

Effective management is highly customized. At a minimum, each group should improve service offerings, create learning environments, become more efficient, attract better work, attract good people and lower turnover. However, true management requires a primarily focus on one or two of these. For example, a highly proficient practice group may focus on attracting better clients while a group serving premium clients may focus on enhancing client satisfaction to protect them from competitors.

Managing partners, therefore, need to let go of the idea that management is a symmetrical matrix. Like children in the family, each group is unique and requires appropriate primary objectives and highly customized encouragement.

In an increasingly competitive world, the partnerships that tolerate the absence of effective management will pay the price... maybe a worthy topic for an upcoming partnership meeting.



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