



MANAGING PARTNER BURNOUT

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Ask any managing partner, and he or she will tell you it isn't as glamorous a position as others may think. And it certainly isn't as easy as it appears. It takes a lot of energy, both physical and emotional, to serve as managing partner. It also takes a lot of skill in areas not taught in law school. For those who try to keep their practices healthy and growing while serving as managing partner, the time demands can easily overwhelm and crowd out time for family and relaxation. For many managing partners, their personal book of business suffers significantly during their tenure, requiring them to rebuild when they return to full time practice.

It's definitely not a job for those who cannot handle an enormous amount of criticism and frustration. Some describe the managing partner's job, like that of a law firm administrator, as one of herding cats. Humorous, but not when you're the one doing the herding, I can assure you.

Lawyers rate off the scale on a need for autonomy, as compared to the general public. The same applies to skepticism. That combination makes lawyers almost impossible to lead, unless they are willing to be led. And even then, they will usually be suspect of an initiative taken or proposed. They will either be looking for a hidden agenda, or reasons why it won't work, even before they try.

Managing partners must sometimes make difficult decisions which are good for the overall health of the firm, but which gore someone's ox in the process. Although understanding and reasonableness may prevail on the surface, memories run long, and enemies are sometimes made. As a result, it's not uncommon for a managing partner to have to battle continuously with one or more partners. Sometimes the battles are noisy and public. Other times they are very subtle, but nonetheless there, always bubbling under the surface, creating tension.

Monday night quarterbacks abound at law firms. Managing partners must be thick skinned to endure the barbs slung easily in hindsight, with a certain amount of smug "told you so" innuendo. And then there are those who see the role of managing partner as nothing more than that of the person who counts paper

clips; they have no concept of what it actually takes to run a law firm, and therefore have no proper measure of respect for the position.

Nowadays the position is even harder as it becomes increasingly difficult to hold onto talented associates, partners, and staff. Sometimes there is just nothing you can do to prevent key partners from leaving. And for the managing partner, it is particularly disheartening. It feels like a personal failure. And it is especially painful when the departing partner is someone the managing partner was grooming as a successor.

Another frequent problem is the criticism leveled at the managing partner when the firm is not profitable, or has an off year. Oftentimes the problem is one which is out of control of the managing partner, such as loss of a key client through no fault of the firm. Sometimes—often—the problem is a result of one or more underproductive partners who fall short of budgeted targets for hours and/or revenues. Ironically, they are often the ones most critical of compensation shortfalls.

I am frequently contacted on the hot line by frustrated managing partners. And I've worked with many privately. They seek advice on a variety of issues—mostly those mentioned above. Many times they just need an “ear” because there really isn't anyone at their firm to whom they can blow off steam. And most pick up the pieces and carry on, determined to make a positive difference at their firm during their tenure. But there are some who don't recover. Those who are so burned out they just give up. In many cases, with consequences for their firm. Generally, the smaller the firm, the greater the consequences can be.

Why would anyone in their right mind become a managing partner, you might ask. It's a largely thankless job that takes huge chunks of time away from ones family and practice development. What makes one accept the responsibility? Is it ego? Yes, sometimes it's pure ego. That's the exception, though. For the most part, it's about seeing a real need at the firm for a strong hand at the rudder, and stepping up to the plate. Yes, there's a certain amount of ego for one to believe that he or she is suited to help the firm succeed and grow. But without it, hardly anyone would be willing to fill the role.

Here are eight things you can do at your firm to help prevent managing partner burnout:

1. **Succession planning:** Have a designated managing partner—elect who observes and assists the managing partner as needed. Knowing there's someone at the firm to take over some day helps keep the managing



partner's perspective positive. Nothing is more disheartening than to have no end in sight, and no prospects at the firm to some day take over the reins. At too many firms, the "future" managing partner has no idea that he or she is actually being groomed for the position. As a result, they sometimes leave for greener pastures. When that happens, it knocks the wind out of the emotional sails of the managing partner, sending him or her back to square one. If a loss of the appointed successor is experienced, aggressively seek a replacement internally—preferably—or by lateral acquisition.

At one firm, the loss of the young partner being groomed left the managing partner so disheartened, with no other prospects at the firm for eventual relief, that he began to search for a larger firm to acquire his firm, just to eliminate the continued management responsibility in the future.

2. **Compensation adjustment:** A firm's managing partner's private practice will suffer during his or her tenure. That is not to say that the partner will be a failure. Many maintain very active practices. But their practice would surely have been even more successful without the distraction. And for some, their devotion to the needs of the firm ultimately decimates much of their own practice. That has to be taken into consideration not only while they serve in the role, but for several years afterwards as they rebuild their practice.

At one firm which failed to adequately compensate two former managing partners in a row, the firm found itself in the position of having no one willing to serve.

3. **Co-Managing partner:** Consider having two managing partners split the job—one to focus on internal day-to-day operational matters like human resources and financial management; the other to focus on external matters such as marketing and client service. Or perhaps one to be the manager, and the other to be the leader or visionary. [See my articles entitled *Leaders, Managers, and Bullies*; *Lawyers as Leaders*; and *Lawyers as Managers*.]
4. **Educational support:** There are events held each year just for managing partners. Remember, this is not stuff you're taught in law school. And it isn't just about counting paper clips. Why make your managing partner reinvent the wheel? Strongly encourage him/her to



attend an event each year in order to network with others who have already addressed some of the challenges your managing partner is facing.

5. **Agree to be led:** Being a partner at a firm is a lot like being a spouse. Successful marriages are built on compromise. So are successful partnerships. Lend your cooperation. Stifle your inner voice screaming at you to take a different path than everyone else at the firm. Don't use your energy resisting uniformity in things like the font you use for documents, when you get your timesheets in, and so forth. Use that energy instead to carve out a unique market position in terms of your client skills. You and the firm will profit and flourish as a result.

Don't make every issue Custer's last stand. I've seen partners waste hours arguing over something as inconsequential as what magazines to put in the reception area. What a ridiculous and unnecessary waste of time (money) and energy. Resolve to agree to be more agreeable as a group. If it isn't of significant consequence to you personally, just let it go.

6. **Don't act like you want the job unless you do:** No doubt about it, partners have a strong tendency to be critical of others. Their tendency to use 20-20 hindsight like a lethal weapon can undo many a managing partner's will to survive.

At one firm, the well loved and respected 7-year managing partner took one barb too many, and resigned on the spot. No amount of coaxing could convince him to return to the position. He blithely suggested they appoint the criticizing partner to the position, since he always seemed to know how to run things better. Of course, that partner didn't want the position.

7. **Have a written job description:** I'm amazed at how few firms actually have a written job description for their managing partner. As a consequence, sometimes the managing partner may not realize what he or she should be proactively doing. Most of the time, though, it means that other partners have no concept of what the job really entails.

At one firm, the long-time managing partner agreed to step down to allow a young Turk to take over. It was quickly evident that the young managing partner had no idea how complex the job really was. He felt it involved nothing more than an occasional hiring or firing, and making sure the firm's partners received financial reports on time.



8. **Say thank you:** Ok, I'm not your mother. But would it kill you to express your appreciation once in a while? At some firms partners joke that one can never make a trip to the rest room while nominations are made for the next managing partner, as one might return to find he or she has been elected!

If you're like most partners, just admit that you don't want that responsibility. You don't want to worry about how things get done for the most part. You want to come into the office each day to find adequate staff, working equipment, well-honed procedures, a clean, professional looking environment, and left alone to practice law. You don't want to worry about paying the bills. You want to do your work, and go home and relax. So think about that from time to time, and take a moment to say "thank you" to the person who makes that possible: the firm's managing partner. It may just help him or her get through another day.

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