

reprinted with permission from the December 2012 issue of

LAW OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR

THE NEWSLETTER FOR LEGAL OFFICE MANAGERS

*P.O. Box 11670 • Atlanta, GA 30355
404/367-1991*

Five skills tell whether a new managing partner will grow or kill the firm

It's easy to name a managing partner. It's difficult to name a right managing partner.

A firm can succeed or fall apart depending on who's at its head, says **STEPHEN MABEY**, a chartered accountant and managing director of Applied Strategies, a law firm management consulting company in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The job can't automatically go to the highest producer or the most popular person. It has to go to a leader who motivates the other partners "to do more than they thought they could do."

There are five base-line criteria an MP has to have.

SKILL #1: A FIRM-FIRST MENTALITY

A firm-first mentality is the top requirement.

The managing partner's first concern has to be firm, not self. The individual "has to be above reproach in that," because decisions have to be made solely for the benefit of the firm and not for personal gain.

Without that, every e-mail will be subject to "what's in it for him?" And that opens the door to financial disaster and dissolution.

A very good sign of an MP candidate's focus is also a very simple one: a me-first person talks about successes in terms of *I*; an us-first person talks in terms of *we*. It's "we brought in this client" as opposed to "I brought the client in."

Another good and simple indicator is the questions the candidate asks about the job. Somebody who starts with "how am I going to be compensated for this?" is

looking out for personal interests. But somebody who begins with "what do we want to do here?" or "what are our main issues?" is a firm-first person.

Also ask why the candidate wants to take on the position. Be wary of someone whose practice is waning. The goal may not be to serve the firm but to save the job, or even create an exit strategy.

SKILL #2: MOTIVATOR, NOT DICTATOR

Essential too is the ability to motivate. An effective MP respects other people's opinions and situations and "knows what buttons to hit" to get them moving.

A you-will-do-this-because-you-have-to person is no leader.

Again, the signs are obvious.

During an interview, the dictator does more talking than listening and dominates the conversation.

The leader asks questions and wants to hear the answers, positive or negative. The statements might be along the lines of "here's where I agree and here's where we might have disagreement." But they have to indicate that the person has listened, not just talked over everybody.

SKILL #3: A WIDE OPEN MIND

Yet another necessity is that the manager partner be "a receptacle for new ideas."

"The best managing partners are able to balance their own opinions with the ideas of others," Mabey

says. They put their egos aside and “draw on a deeper brain trust than themselves.”

Further, they are receptive to good ideas regardless of the source. They appreciate that the nonattorney staff have valuable recommendations just as the attorneys do. They “forget the source and look at the quality of the idea.”

To evaluate receptivity, just ask a question that dismantles some recommendation the candidate has made. For example, “You say you want the firm to increase business in area X. But that area of law appears to be dying. Why do you want to make that move?”

The open-minded person will ask for more information with a response such as “You raise a valid point. What is your view of the long-term viability of that area of law?”

The closed-minded candidate argues and says “No way. That area is where we need to go.”

In an interview situation, he says, “people react on instinct” and their true personalities come out.

SKILL #4: BELIEVABILITY

Credibility is a further requirement.

The candidate “needs to have a good track record” of following through with promises and recommendations. There also needs to be a history of success in managing conflicts and hitting profitability targets and dealing with crises.

A sure sign of credibility is the willingness to own up to mistakes, Mabey says. Ask about a past mistake, for example, “Let’s talk about how you handled X. Here is what I understand happened. What’s your take on the situation?”

The sign of credibility is a response of “I made a mistake.” The sign that the firm needs to find another

candidate is a response that “revises history” or places the blame on somebody else.

Anybody who can’t say “I was wrong” has no credibility. Eventually, nobody will believe that person.

SKILL #5: KNOWING HOW TO TALK

The last factor is communication ability.

Getting the other partners to collaborate on a project or idea requires explaining it so they understand what’s going on and showing the win/win side and demonstrating a passion for it. A good communicator also can say “no, this isn’t going to work” in such a way that the listener responds with “thanks for telling me no.”

There has to be a sense of team within any firm, he says. “Lawyers need to hunt in packs even in an eat-what-you-kill environment.”

The skill is easy to detect. Just ask an open-ended question, even as simple as “what do you think about the future of law here in Oregon?” and see if the answer is clear, well articulated, and passionate.

A CONSENSUS, NOT AN ELECTION

As to how to select the new MP, Mabey’s advice is don’t vote on it.

Make the choice instead an informal consensus of who’s the best fit for the job. The search committee presents it as “we’ve canvassed everybody, and we think So-and-So is the best candidate for the position.” Then everybody says yes or no and moves on. With that approach, the decision is a thoughtful one.

By contrast, an election “becomes a popularity contest.” It forces people to choose sides, and the invariable outcome is that one side supports the new MP while the other supports the rejected candidate.

LAW OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR

P.O. Box 11670 • Atlanta, GA 30355

404/367-1991

www.ardmorepublishing.com