

Managing Partners Wear Two Hats Well

ORIGINALLY, DALE GOLDSMITH HAD NO INTEREST IN becoming a managing partner. As an associate at Greenberg Glusker in Los Angeles, he actively avoided the management track, preferring instead to concentrate on developing his law practice. But when he founded his own

firm in 2004 with fellow land use attorney Mark Armbruster, he began to rethink things. Seeing Armbruster's tendency to scribble notes on random legal pads and store receipts in boxes shoved under a desk, Goldsmith realized that he might be the better suited of the two for the role of managing partner.

"I began to think 'That's a little disorganized, maybe I need to take over,'"

spend more, but I want to focus on practicing law. After all, why did I go to law school? It wasn't to just become a manager."

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says Goldsmith, who is now managing partner at the eight-lawyer Armbruster Goldsmith & Delvac firm in Los Angeles. "It's like the Dutch philosopher Erasmus said, 'In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.' And I just happened to be the one-eyed man."

Few lawyers consciously set out to become managing partners. Some, like Goldsmith, fall into the role out of necessity; others are tapped for the position when senior partners see they have the right personality for the job; and still others get elected by popular consensus. But even as these managing-partners-in-the-making rise to the occasion, they are increasingly reluctant to give up their own law practices.

"I spend half my time managing the firm," says Goldsmith, "I could

responsible for overseeing all the different aspects of the firm that keep clients satisfied, lawyers working, and the office busy.

At Farella Braun + Martel in San Francisco, managing partner Steve Lowenthal keeps an eye on his firm's flex-time and work-from-home programs for associates with special needs. He also monitors the planning of the firm's annual ski trip to the Sierras, a project that administrative staffers carry out.

At San Francisco's Keker & Van Nest, Chris Kearney makes sure that the firm lives up to its policy of giving new associates their chance at real trial experience—either by examining witnesses during cases or by participating in pro bono cases referred by federal district judges.

And in Los Angeles, Richard Grant helps steer McGuire Woods's annual participation in a local "Food from the Bar" charity drive.

Even with those additional responsibilities, a managing partner still has to find time to be a lawyer.

"It almost turns practicing law into your night job," says Grant. "It would be incorrect to say it doesn't add hours to your day. But I just have to remember what I love and what's most important is client work. When I took on the managing partner job, I wrote down on a piece of paper 'Remember the job you love the most.'"

That can be a heavy burden on managing partners. Dale Goldsmith regularly works twelve-hour days, but he tries to limit his management work to one or two hours a day. Ellen Kahn of Sideman & Bancroft in San Francisco says she devotes a third of her time to management. Each weekday she spends up to 14 hours on firm business, plus another four to five hours on weekend days.

But there are only so many days in a week. No lawyer wants to let clients dangle because he or she was too consumed with planning a symposium or hiring new associates. And so as a matter of necessity managing partners tailor their styles to leave themselves enough time to meet clients' needs—and occasionally get some sleep as well.

"My approach is to delegate everything I can to nonlawyers in the office," says Goldsmith. "I still have to sleep three or four hours a day, after all! A lot of managing partners get so involved that they're choosing the color of the office toilet paper. I trust our office manager that we'll get a nice floral."

The biggest stumbling block to managing a law firm while simultaneously developing one's own practice isn't the big things—it's being consumed by minutia. That's why Goldsmith recommends using a light touch as a managing partner, avoiding superfluous meddling in his lawyers' affairs. He's found that approach also gets the best results from fellow lawyers who may bristle at the prospect of being micromanaged.

"Lawyers have a well-deserved reputation for being egomaniacs," he says. "It's like a sports team: When you have a bunch of high achievers, it's difficult to do things without someone feeling that they're not getting the appropriate recognition. You have to be sensitive to their feelings and understand how to placate them."

Goldsmith's thorniest job as managing partner came early on, when the partners of his current firm disagreed about the décor for the office: Armbruster liked antiques, while other partners favored an eastern art or punk goth motif. "I wanted to decorate with abstract modern art myself," says Goldsmith, who is partial to Picasso and Lichtenstein. With that experience, he realized that a big part of his job was to find consensus and build bridges.

Like Goldsmith, other managing partners have learned to relinquish some control to free up time for the legal practice they love; micromanaging only eats hours that could be better spent otherwise. "A lot of partners get frustrated with being 'managed' at large firms," says Robert O'Brien, managing partner of Arent Fox in Los Angeles and a proponent of a hands-off approach. O'Brien came to understand the key distinction between micromanagement and leadership while he was a



Dale Goldsmith



Ellen Kahn



Steve Lowenthal

young Judicial Advocate General officer in the Army Reserve and later the U.S. Alternate Representative to the United Nations General Assembly in 2005. "You realize you're not working on your own behalf," he says. "Likewise, much of what I do as a managing partner isn't anything I do on my own behalf; I'm representing the firm. You learn humility when you're doing something for others. And when people see you trying to serve their interests, they'll follow."

Other managing partners agreed that the "consent of the governed" can be an especially important tool at law firms, due to their unique structure.

"When you're a partner in a law firm, you're an owner," says Ellen Kahn of Sideman & Bancroft. "In other professions, there's one president and people follow his orders. In a law firm, every partner has that sense of ownership. So partners need to be comfortable with your leadership to relinquish control and let you do what you need to do to move the firm forward."

Only relatively recently, though, have firms come to rely on the managing partner to achieve consensus on the big decisions; before, junior partners and other lawyers typically had little say in the firm's direction, sometimes not even learning about major moves until after the fact. Today's managing partners still bear the burden of decision-making, but they place much more value on having buy-in from the rest of the firm as well.

"The last generation of lawyers have really become more mindful of being team players," says Carley Roberts, who in February took over as partner in charge of the Sacramento office of Sutherland Asbill & Brennan.

In her first four weeks of managing

the office, she recruited two attorneys; hired new support staff; grappled with office space, technology, and work flow issues; was active in marketing; made several trips to the firm's Atlanta and Washington, D.C., offices to integrate operations; and tried to keep everyone in the loop. Looking back at a career that includes ten years as a partner at Morrison & Forrester, Roberts couldn't recall as demanding a month to deal with management needs and serve clients at the same time.

"To be successful, you need happy clients," she said. "There are some growing pains, because some days you have to focus more on office management, but top-notch client service can't ever go by the wayside."

Avoid making assumptions, cautions McGuire Woods's Grant. "Find out what people want and do your research," he says. "You'll be surprised at how much you learn by talking to people—not just your partners, but staff, receptionists, legal assistants, everyone. Find common goals and build on them. The most important thing is to steer the firm vision."

Even though most managing partners rely heavily on nonlawyer administrative teams to take care of the daily grind, they still agree that the position of managing partner should ultimately be filled by a lawyer—no matter how reluctantly.

"I think you really need to be a lawyer to effectively serve as managing partner," says Craig Adas, managing partner for the Redwood City office of Weil, Gotshal & Manges. "Lawyers have a better understanding of how lawyers think."

The best and most effective managing partners understand which decisions require partner involvement, and when to steer clear of micromanaging details.

"I see myself as a lawyer who also works as a managing partner," says Adas. "If I didn't still practice law, I wouldn't enjoy as much getting up each day to go to work." ☺

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