

If Senior Partners and Managing Partners can work together effectively then they can do a great deal to drive a firm forwards. However, the absence of clearly defined roles and a spirit of co-operation can cause serious problems. How should this issue be approached? Peter Scott suggests an effective model to make the most of the pairing.

At a time when the performance of law firm managements is coming under the spotlight, the impending retirement of a Senior or Managing Partner provides an opportunity for a firm to rethink its top management structure and to consider whether the traditional Senior Partner/Managing Partner structure is appropriate for the future. This is particularly so when the economic outlook may be uncertain and when the quality of the firm's management will be crucial.

Most law firms have in some form within their structures roles variously described as 'Senior Partner/Chairman' and 'Managing Partner/Chief Executive'. However, many firms have not tried to define these crucial roles too closely, particularly in relation to each other, and very little thought is given to how the incumbents of the two positions will or can work together for the good of the firm.

What do law firms need in terms of senior management roles?

Every firm is different, and a solution for one firm may be inappropriate for another. However in all cases firms do need leadership, although the precise type and extent of that leadership will differ from firm to firm according to circumstances and needs.

To achieve effective leadership, an organisation structure which I have advocated to some firms makes the Senior Partner role the senior executive role in the firm: it is not one that is above the day to day operations of the firm. The old idea of a Senior Partner remote from management is not one that now works effectively.

This 'Executive Senior Partner' role is designed to fulfil the following specific functions:

* To provide leadership to the firm, especially in developing the business strategy. Today's law firm needs a person at its head who has vision - a realistic appreciation of what the firm is (or is not) and an inspirational vision of what the firm can make of itself. That person, at the head of the firm, has to command sufficient respect and trust from the partners to enable him or her to be listened to, and must



be able to persuade them by his or her arguments, ultimately leading them forward to achieve the vision.

* To carry out a vital client relationship management role with important clients and to take the lead in business development and profile raising.

* To provide 'pastoral' support, not only to partners but to everyone in the firm. However, the Senior Partner in this situation must be careful to ensure that this role is not seen by the 'old guard' (most firms have them) as a means to put a block on development or change. On the other hand, having an 'elder statesman' with whom to talk through problems can be an enormous benefit to a Managing Partner.

This is not to suggest that the Senior Partner should take on the heavy responsibility of monitoring and managing the day to day operations of the firm. Rather, the performance of the firm would be reported to the Senior Partner on a frequent and regular basis by the Managing Partner who would, depending upon the size of the firm and its development plans, devote 100% of his or her time to that role. In this model, the Managing Partner would be responsible for the overall performance of the firm. He or she would report to the Senior Partner and they would together deal with key decisions that needed to be made. Together they would form the 'Top Team' to take the firm forwards.

This example of an organisational structure shows that the working relationship between the Senior Partner and Managing Partner is vital to the success and well-being of the firm. No structure will work, however good, if the people operating it are not prepared to give it a chance.



DOUBLE TROUBLE AT THE TOP

A spirit of co-operation

'Working together' for some people is not easy. Many partners in law firms today still have a fear of an all-powerful Managing Partner who is likely to eject them from their comfort zones and will install a 'minder' to keep him or her in check. If a Senior Partner believes he or she has a mandate from the partners to protect them from the Managing Partner, then there is likely to be strife.

A Senior Partner who does not fulfil the 'Executive Senior Partner' role will often fulfil certain other functions, such as being in the chair at partners' meetings and being the outward face of the firm. But even this can lead to conflict, particularly if the Managing Partner sees himself or herself as rightly carrying out those roles. This is quite likely to happen if the Managing Partner is in the mould of the 'I am not the Number Two to anybody' type. If however the two resolve to work together, a Senior Partner who is right for such roles can be extremely valuable to both the Managing Partner and the firm.

There are a number of permutations of these roles which firms can put in place to deal with their specific needs, provided they can find (which is often the problem) the right people.

Whatever solution/pairing is put together, one thing is clear: those involved will have to be prepared to work together as a team for the good of the whole firm. It is often said that if law firms were more corporate in structure and style then these issues would not be so relevant. There are however many instances of major corporations suffering because the Chairman and Chief Executive have clashed.

Whatever the structure, what is really required to provide the necessary and successful leadership for the organisation are the right

people in the roles and a willingness on their part to work together as a team and with others.

How will you choose your next Senior and Managing Partners?

Before you do, ask yourself a few questions:

* What roles will have to be performed in the next stage of your firm's development? (roles will change as firms change)

* Do you have people within the firm capable of successfully carrying out those roles and are they prepared to take on those roles and if so upon what terms?

* Will they be the team capable of taking forward the firm to achieve its goals?

* Have you thought what you are going to do with your Senior and Managing Partners at the end of their terms?

* If the right people are either not willing to take on the jobs or they do not exist, are there alternatives - for example, an outsider who may or may not be a lawyer? Many firms will still find this a step too far and will prefer to appoint internal compromise candidates who are unlikely to ever deliver what the firms really need to take them forward to meet the challenges now facing the profession.

Unless and until partners in law firms are prepared to appoint the best possible people to manage to add value to their businesses, then the profession will continue to fail to realise its full potential. That is the challenge for those in today's legal profession who are in the position to effect that change.

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