

How To Climb Your Firm's Leadership Ladder

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, New York (May 28, 2015, 6:36 PM ET) -- Charting a course across the stormy seas of billable hours, difficult clients and cutthroat colleagues to grab a spot at the top of a law firm takes more than intelligence and hard work, it involves strategically gaining visibility and developing a knack for building relationships and your brand, experts say.

Sean P. Wajert, managing partner of Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP's Philadelphia office, says ambitious associates should focus on what he calls internal brand-building. That means they should calculate a course to the top and be aware of how they're viewed within the firm, the roles they take on and the relationships they nurture impact their future.

Here, leaders at five different firms offer tips on how to climb the ranks and snag a leadership role.

Demonstrate Interest and Initiative

According to Wajert, the initial step to becoming a top player in any law firm is to become recognizable as a competent and driven lawyer who is demonstrably interested in taking on the role.

"Express an interest. Not everyone is interested in leadership roles, and not everyone will automatically assume you have such an interest," Wajert said.

Mayanne Downs, firmwide litigation chairwoman for GrayRobinson PA, explained showing an eagerness for leadership roles usually involves agreeing to take on a lot of work that may not be billable, but that demonstrates decision-making ability, a flair for influencing others and having a vision for the firm's future.

"For someone interested in pursuing a leadership role my advice is: Volunteer, volunteer, volunteer," Downs said. "There's always nonbillable work to be done. Do it, and do it well and become indispensable."

Wajert says that this can be accomplished by never rejecting committee assignments, formal or ad hoc, which offer the opportunity in a smaller group setting to express ideas, ask questions and learn about the inner workings of the firm.

"Much of this internal brand-building process can stem from a willingness to simply raise your hand whenever an opportunity arises," he said. "You want to raise your visibility in this firm administration

context.”

And that isn't an easy feat; it takes more than a surface level interest in the intricacies of a practice area or the day-to-day mechanics of running a law firm. According to Kent Altom, managing partner of McCalla Raymer LLC, it takes true engagement in the firm and in one's work.

“The hours you work as an attorney will be long,” Altom said. “The more engaged you are in your work, the more rewarding your career will be.”

Altom suggests that if young attorneys find themselves losing focus, they should let their supervising partner know — sooner rather than later — so they can find a way to get more work they actually enjoy doing.

“It is not unheard of for an associate to start in one practice group and become a partner in another one,” he said. “A career path is not always linear, so do not be afraid to take a step or two back to head in a different direction.”

Be Principled and Civil

To avoid stumbling on the path to becoming a firm leader, young attorneys must not only master their craft, but they must also guard their character at all costs in order to command the respect of those around them, Altom advised.

“Think of attorneys you know who have true character and demonstrate unflappable civility — the kind that shines through in every encounter you have with them. The admiration you have for those attorneys is a reflection of their daily decision to doggedly guard their character and to show civility toward others, in every situation,” he said.

The managing partner says that when he was first starting out in law, he decided there were certain terms he would never use to describe another attorney inside or outside the courtroom. At the top of that list is “disingenuous.”

Altom said there have been times when that may have been the most appropriate adjective to use in light of another attorney's behavior, but one important element of leadership is demonstrating the ability to strongly adhere to a set of values in order to earn the respect of others in the profession, he said.

“Decide now — before the heat of the battle — what lines you will not cross in your interactions with opposing counsel, not because the other side does not deserve it, but because our legal profession deserves better of each one of us,” Altom said.

Wajert expounded on that point, saying making it to the top of a law firm involves demonstrating the characteristics that lawyers look for in their leaders: acting consistently with stated values and principles, as well as demonstrating competence.

Build Relationships and Consensus

The types of relationships that existing law firm leaders have nurtured are vast and intertwined: There are relationships within a practice group or geographic area, firmwide relationships, and those with

clients, judges and government officials.

It is the job of an aspiring leader to nurture and build all of those relationships, said Gordon Quan, managing partner of Quan Law Group PLLC.

“Many times more junior attorneys think they need to be just grinding out work. Join associations; you show your value to the firm in a greater way with contacts,” Quan said.

Quan suggests choosing an area of interest and co-writing an article with a current firm leader.

By writing an article, a young attorney can conduct an in-depth study of a specific topic and distinguish him or herself as an expert in that specific area, he said. Plus, the co-author will be glad that the younger lawyer took the initiative and be honored to have been asked to be a part of it.

“You can gain some prestige with your boss by doing that,” Quan suggested.

Another element of building relationships is learning to work as part of a team and creating consensus, a skill that each of the experts pointed to as essential in anyone looking to secure a leadership role.

“Develop a reputation as a consensus builder and a good listener,” said Michael R. Lastowski, managing partner of Duane Morris LLP’s Wilmington, Delaware, office. “Your peers are more likely to acquiesce in a decision with which they disagree if they believe that their views have been heard and considered.”

--Editing by John Quinn and Rebecca Flanagan.