3 Ways Newly Minted Law Firm Leaders Screw Up

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, New York (June 4, 2015, 3:41 PM ET) -- A number of land mines dot the path of a freshly appointed law firm leader attempting to guide a team to harmoniously, productively and efficiently work together, and experts say the key to not screwing up comes down to communication, inclusiveness and consensus.

Building consensus, and consequently morale, is a skill that may not come naturally to every attorney looking to climb the law firm leadership ladder, but it is one that must be fostered, managing partners and practice group leaders told Law360.

"The best way to build morale is to assure that all of your team members know that their contributions and opinions are valued," Michael R. Lastowski, managing partner ofDuane Morris LLP's Wilmington, Delaware, office said. "Inclusiveness and consensus encourage candor, and it is only in an atmosphere of candor that leaders can be sure that they have their hands on the pulse of their group."

Here, experts offer their advice on how to avoid flubbing when given those first few leadership opportunities.

Failing to Communicate

Many who have worked in groups understand the feeling of not knowing what is expected of you or others and not having a clear picture of the team's direction or end goals. It is exactly that type of atmosphere that breeds discontent and results in a leadership flop, Lastowski said.

"No one wants to hear from a third party what she or he believes should have been personally communicated from a decision maker," he said.

Leaders must provide constructive criticism and communicate other uncomfortable but necessary details to those on their team.

"No one likes to be the bearer of unwelcome news. However, your duty of candor requires prompt communication," Lastowski said.

Sean P. Wajert, managing partner of Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP's Philadelphia office, says successful leaders not only are good at communicating their vision to others but also actively listen, allowing team members opportunities to provide feedback, ask questions and express concerns.

"Finding out what matters to the team, getting valuable feedback and input — these may take a more aggressive approach: creating an atmosphere where people on the team feel comfortable communicating their thoughts, but also going out your office door to them," Wajert said.

A Lack of Inclusiveness

Many lawyers working their way to the top of a law firm have already developed close relationships while practicing, friends whom they can readily approach for advice and counsel.

But, that reliance on a tight-knit group of friends as advisers can doom young lawyers looking to demonstrate their leadership capabilities, Lastowski said.

"Some newly appointed practice group leaders or office heads inadvertently create the impression that all decisions are being made by an inner circle," he said. "Those relationships are invaluable to any leader. However, a leader has to reach out beyond any inner circle when making strategic decisions."

Wajert said inclusiveness in the realm of communication should be extended to delegating tasks and even some decision making to those in other areas. Delegation has the ability to enhance, rather than diminish, a leader's position, he explained.

"It may be better for you, and the firm, when leaders understand their strong points and develop those fully, while delegating any weaker areas to others in leadership roles in the firm who are strong in those areas and can complement you," Wajert said.

Not Building Consensus

Mayanne Downs, firmwide litigation chairwoman for GrayRobinson PA, said the biggest rookie mistake when entrusted with a leadership position is advancing a project or initiative without the consensus of colleagues impacted by the decision.

"Franklin Delano Roosevelt said a good leader doesn't get too far ahead of his followers," she said.

Organizational change is often slow and usually requires building consensus on the front end, Kent Altom, managing partner of McCalla Raymer LLC, explained.

That means considering how a new procedure or policy should be rolled out in order to foster acceptance, especially by those most impacted by the change, he said.

"Remember, especially in a workplace setting, even positive change causes people to ask, 'What does this mean for me?'" he said.

Altom suggests that newly minted leaders' first dozen decisions to make change be ones that nearly everyone involved will support.

"After you have made a dozen or so 'right decisions' in the eyes of those you have been entrusted to lead, they will follow you anywhere," Altom said. "You'll be glad you did."