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Hit the Ground Running

Set goals, redefine relationships and communicate as a leader.

BY JAY SULLIVAN

CONGRATULATIONS! We've made you a partner! All those years of hard work have paid off. All those long hours away from family and friends. Years of grunt work followed by years of challenging assignments. We've recognized the potential you bring to the firm and are rewarding you for all of your dedication and hard work.

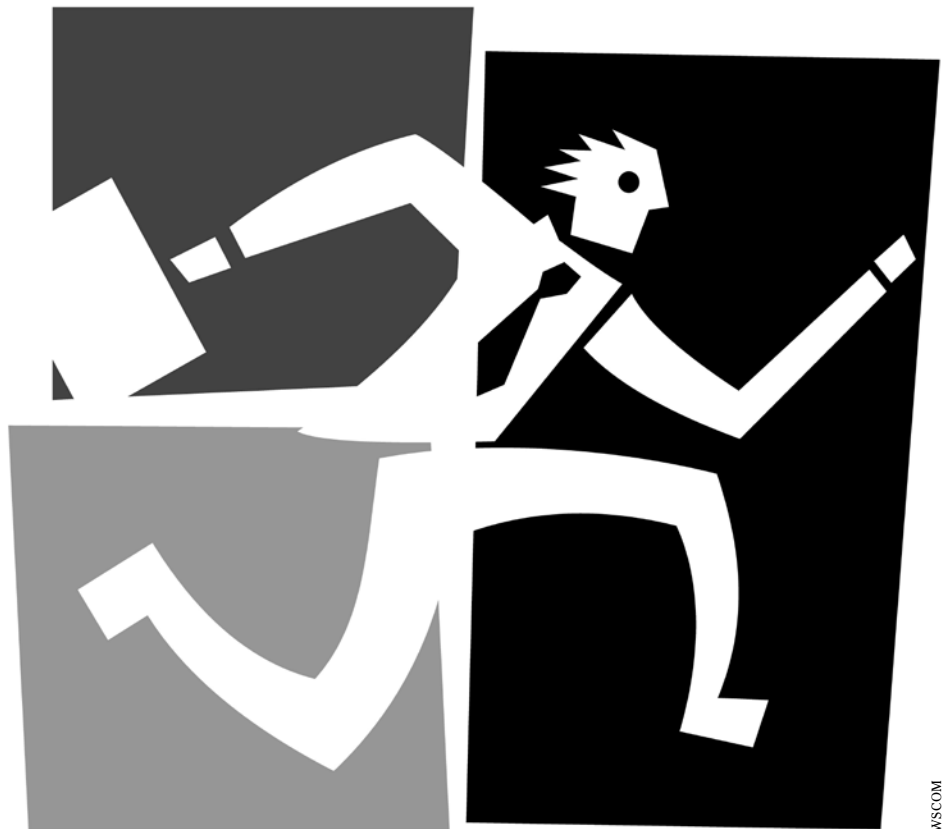
Let's get started. So, what have you done for us lately?

Although the question will not be asked that bluntly, your new partners will be asking you some form of it for the rest of your career. And you will be asking it of them even more stringently from your new vantage point as a partner.

How can you hit the ground running? Here are a few suggestions for how you can give yourself a head-start on your new position. We'll look at how you set goals for yourself, how you can redefine your relationships with associates, and how you can communicate as a leader.

Understand the Measurement Metrics

Most firms, both large and small, have "competency models" against which they measure an associate's development. The model usually includes the skills and



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experiences needed for each stage of a successful legal career.

That assessment process doesn't end when you become partner. If you just turned 35 and are now a partner, you aren't "finished." It's silly to think you won't be growing for the next 30 years. Ask your HR professional for a copy of the evaluation form that you will be graded against at the end of this year. If your firm doesn't

use a specific form, ask the managing partner what criteria are used to determine different roles.

How can you position yourself to be the head of a practice group, or the head of the small satellite office? What skills sets do they want you to possess beyond being an extremely competent lawyer?

In the current economy, bringing in business may be the firm's one and

JAY SULLIVAN, a former practicing attorney, is a partner at Exec|Comm, a communications consulting firm, where he heads the law firm group. He can be reached at jsullivan@exec-comm.com.

only stated goal for you. However, other factors will undoubtedly come into play. Understanding how much emphasis should be placed on developing a specific skill will be important as you make strategic choices during the year about where to invest time beyond servicing your clients.

You may be surprised to discover how much emphasis will be placed on your role developing other attorneys. Cambria Consulting, a human resources consulting firm, conducted an exhaustive study of 62 corporate leadership competency models. The key “leadership practice” that appeared more often than any other practice for leaders was “developing people.”¹ In fact, “developing people” was listed more often than “getting results.”

If you are a partner at a small firm, where the ratio of associates to partners may be lower than at a large firm, it will be that much more important for you to be focused on developing junior talent.

Understanding evaluation metrics will also help you decide on your professional development plan for the year. If your firm does not have a structured professional development plan for partners, create one for yourself. Start with three basic questions:

- What do I want to get out of my career?
- Where do I see myself in five years?
- What do I need to do this year in order to achieve that five-year goal?

Next, determine five professional goals for yourself for this year, everything from “bring in five new clients to the firm” to “publish two articles on developments in my area of the law.” Make sure each goal is SMART:

Specific (“increase ‘win’ rate on cases” is specific; “be a better lawyer” is not.)

Measurable (“improve communication skills,” is not measurable; “improve feedback on next PLI lecture I deliver” can be quantified.)

Attainable (“double my billable hours” is impossible given how many hours you billed last year. To continually miss your goals is disheartening and defeatist.)

Relevant (If the goal is tangential, rather than fundamental, to your long term goal, you simply won’t get to it this year. You will continually put it at the bottom of your priority list.)

Time-bound (If you don’t put parameters around your goals, you will keep putting them off.)

Finally, write down your goals and keep them somewhere where you can reference them. Write in your calendar quarterly reminders to check in on your goals to measure your progress.

If an associate with whom you have a close relationship raises an issue of firm management, do not voice dissent from the ‘party line.’ You are part of management now, and whether you liked the firm’s decision on an issue or strongly objected to it in a partner meeting, once the decision is made, it is your responsibility to help others understand the rationale for the change and to get behind the new direction the firm is taking on that issue.

Same Game, Different Team

Recognize that for you now, the game is the same, but you just switched teams.

Yesterday, you were an associate. In your prior life, when other associates complained “I can’t believe they made that decision,” or “This place is just poorly run,” you could nod with agreement or shake your head in disgust, knowingly, whether you agreed with them or not.

No more. Overnight, you went from one side to the other in the great office game of “us” versus “them.”

For some, it’s easy to leave the old alliances behind and join the new team. Professionals in that camp always saw themselves as partners anyway, and are just glad now to take their seats with their “true” peer group. Other people find making the transition in status more difficult, and are thinking, “Nothing has really changed. I am the same person I

was last month and the associates will still see me as one of them.”

Don’t count on it. Your peers from yesterday will now question every comment they share with you. They will wonder if confidences will still be kept, whether grievances, small and large, can be safely shared, whether they are as welcome to “shoot the breeze” with you, and whether you will continue to be as forthcoming with your own thoughts as you were last month.

And with good reason. Your alliance has, by necessity, shifted. That’s not good or bad, it’s just reality.

You have a fiduciary duty to your partners and will be privy to confidential information that you cannot share with non-partners. The question isn’t how do you maintain the same relationships with the rank and file at the firm. You can’t. Those relationships are irrevocably different now. The question is, how do you evolve those relationships so that they are healthy, productive and fun, in spite of your new role?

One of the reasons people want to be part of any organization is the enjoyment they derive from the people around them. Most people who don’t like their colleagues move to a different firm rather than commit their career to building a successful enterprise with people they don’t like. If you agreed to become partner, chances are you want to continue to develop along with your colleagues.

If you thought you were busy as an associate, just wait. As a partner, you will have non-billable commitments beyond what you imagined. Committee meetings, performance reviews of associates, partner duties of overseeing client relationships, business development responsibilities and general administrative duties will occupy a significant portion of your time, even more so at smaller firms. The best way to take your relationships with associates and other non-partners at the firm to the next level is to keep the lines of communication open.

Although you won’t have as much time to chat with everyone as you did before, you should make an effort to continue to connect with people. Simply by virtue of your new title, you are a leader at the

firm. Leaders are present to the other people in their organization.

If you don't already do so, start walking around in the morning, and saying a brief hello to everyone in your area or on your floor. I'm not suggesting a full-blown conversation with everyone. A simple "Good morning," accompanied by a smile, lets people know you are around and accessible. Small conversations will undoubtedly ensue and will help you continue to build your network at the firm.

This may sound trite, but it isn't. A quick "Hello" may be the only interaction some people at the firm have with you, and you want there to be some connection.

Some people are more deliberate in the way they greet or exchange pleasantries with others. They make what they consider more strategic decisions about whom to be nice to and whom to ignore.

Strategy has its place, but being strategic about showing minor courtesies is disingenuous and always comes back to bite you. Your colleagues will see through the veneer and, in the long run, you will alienate them.

An important lesson that successful and efficient professionals learn is that it simply takes less energy to be nice to everyone, than to figure out who you have to be nice to. That doesn't mean you have to bend over backwards to accommodate everyone; just that you have to show a baseline of interest and courtesy to everyone at the firm, from the guard in the lobby to the managing partner.

When you are in deep conversations with associates with whom you have close relationships, and they raise an issue of firm management, you will do yourself and the partnership a disservice if you voice dissent from the "party line." You are part of management now, and whether you liked the firm's decision on an issue or strongly objected to it in a partner meeting, once the decision is made, it is your responsibility to help others understand the rationale for the change and get behind the new direction the firm is taking on that issue.

If you pull the old, "Well, just between the two of us..." you accomplish two things. First, you undermine the firm's ability to move forward with the new

initiative. Second, you point out to a junior person that you either have no influence at the firm, since you weren't able to sway your partners, or you didn't have the backbone to speak up at a partner meeting. Neither result makes you look stronger.

When someone is voicing disagreement with a firm decision, instead of agreeing with that person, probe to understand his frustration. Don't presuppose you understand his point of view. Remember, you are approaching the issue from a different perspective than he is. (You may not like the decision because it impacts your role as a junior partner. He might dislike the decision for a completely different reason.) Then, respond in a manner that bolsters the firm in the eyes of the associate.

For example, let's say the firm has just changed health insurance providers. Your best friend at the firm, still an associate, is voicing her frustration to you. Don't respond with, "I know. I'm ticked too. I told them it wasn't a good idea." That gets you nothing.

Instead, respond with, "I know how you feel. I too am going to have to change doctors. Would it help if I explained to you why the firm made the switch?"

Then, if possible, frame the discussion around a benefit to the associate. If the switch was made solely to save money, a benefit that seemingly accrues only to the benefit of the partners, you can still say, "So far in partner meetings, I have been very impressed with the way the firm makes decisions and their effort to look out for the best interests of everyone. Not all decisions will have the same effect, but I still trust the integrity of the process." Take the high road whenever possible.

When listening to a junior associate, keep an open mind and ask open questions; You will open the door to new ways of considering an issue.

Communicate Like a Leader

To be a leader, you need to know who you are (your values), what you want (your vision), and how you plan to get there (your plan).

Your values. By now, you should have a sense of who you are and what is important to you. Whether you realize it

or not, your decisions will be driven by those elements.

Your vision. You didn't become partner by mistake. You worked hard, consciously decided you wanted to achieve this goal, and kept your eyes on the prize. Now isn't the time to sit back and enjoy the ride. If you do, the ride will be pretty short and disappointing. Now is the time to develop a clear goal of where you want your career to lead.

Your plan. When leading others toward your goal, you have to communicate clearly where you are headed and how you plan to get there. That's where your communication skills come into play. You are only a leader if other people are willing to follow you. Hence, leadership is all about other people.

Effective communicators focus less on themselves, and more on other people. By doing so, they eliminate the jargon in their writing and their conversations. They know instinctively that the dialogue is never about them, and it's rarely about their content. It's always about how the other person is going to use that content. It's all about the other person's needs.

When communicating, there are three powerful lines you can use to increase your impact.

Imagine that a client or colleague has just called and described a problem. Our instinct is to identify the issue. In other words, our instinct is to start talking toward a solution. Instead, back up and ask the other person, "How can I help?" By posing this question, we make it clear that we don't want to monopolize the conversation. We want our answers to be responsive to the needs of the other person.

If "How can I help?" doesn't seem appropriate, try, "What would be most helpful to you?" By asking the question in this manner, you tie in two key words that generate responses, "you," and, "help."

Finally, if you feel the person with whom you are speaking doesn't have enough substantive knowledge to make a decision, ask, "Would it be helpful to you if I...?" By framing the question this way, you get to suggest to your listener what you feel is the proper course of action.

In all three cases, you are trying to discover the true needs of the other

person, whether it's a potential client trying to size up your firm, a junior associate dealing with a workload issue, or a peer worried about the firm's future stability. The other person's response will allow you to target your comments toward their key need.

Mark Treanor, who now consults with law firms and in-house legal departments on how to work well together,² was the general counsel of Wachovia for 10 years. During that time, he listened to pitches from more than a few firms who wanted a piece of Wachovia's legal work. And yet one conversation stood out.

"I was meeting with a young partner of a firm that wanted to work with us. I was used to partners talking endlessly about themselves and their firms. And yet this young attorney spoke for only a minute or two to introduce his firm, and then asked me all sorts of questions about Wachovia's needs and goals. After he had a better understanding of what I was looking for, he was able to hone in on a few key services his firm could provide that met the needs I had described. After the meeting, we hired him for a specific project we had. His willingness to listen rather than talk impressed me, particularly considering how junior he was."

In business, we communicate to get what we want from other people.

That's not selfish or Machiavellian; it's just efficient. Sometimes you want more credibility, or more business, or more stature.

How do you get what you want from other people? You give them what they need.

Does the other person need more information, or just confidence that you know the information? Does she need a sense of commitment from you, or a sense of competence?

When a client calls, it's usually because she needs you to solve a problem. When an associate stops by your office, he may be looking more just to be heard than to have you fix something. A good listener finds out what the other person needs and then meets that need.

As Mr. Treanor says, "Sometimes as general counsel, I needed absolute certainty on a matter because the risk was so great. Other times, 80 percent certainty was good enough. The firms I preferred to work with needed to know that baseline need in order to be effective."

This is especially important for you as you move into your role as a partner. Clients and colleagues will expect a heightened level of understanding of the issues. More importantly, they will expect a heightened understanding of how to handle people.

You are in a transition phase of your career. The new title conveys added responsibility to you, and allows others to have heightened expectations. You can meet those expectations better if you are aware of how you will be measured, how you are perceived and how you can communicate from the other person's perspective.

Think of the associate phase of your career as comparable to adolescence: We are self-absorbed with our own development. The partner phase is comparable to adulthood: Now it's about the kids—the clients and the associates.

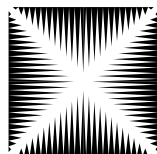
It's a simple analogy, but it holds true. Being a leader in the firm means you have taken responsibility for the livelihood of other people. It's a big job, and best met by being focused on others.

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1. For an in-depth analysis of competency models, see "Leadership Competencies: Putting It All Together," by George Klemp, partner, Cambria Consulting, www.cambriaconsulting.com.

2. Mr. Treanor can be reached at marktreanor@mctreanor.com.

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Exec/Comm

28 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036

Phone: 800.394.1700 Fax: 212.684.2688

info@exec-comm.com

www.exec-comm.com