

Look before you leap when offered a leadership role

Ensure that you're the right person, at the right time, for the new role

Managing private practice firms has gotten even more challenging in recent years, so perhaps it is no surprise that the current leadership has asked you to take on a new role in the firm.

But is this the right time in your career and your life? What are your inherent strengths and do your strengths align with what the firm needs right now? Can you look down the runway and predict your next step when the leadership role runs its course?



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Let's peel back the layers and give you some questions to ponder.

To put this decision in context it is important to clearly understand where your firm is in its life cycle. Are the founding partners still in the firm? What is their level of influence and where does your view of the firm align or differ? Is the firm positioned for growth and if so what practice areas will define the firm's future? Has the firm suffered any recent blows from which it needs to stabilize? Where is the firm positioned in its marketplace? What are its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats? What are the demographics of the firm and

will you have sufficient support and sufficient influence going forward?

Considering where your firm is and what it needs over the next three to five years will inform whether this is the right role for you at this point in your career and if you are the right person for the role at this point in the firm's life cycle. Great people who step in at the wrong time can mean failure for the partner and for the firm.

Second, think about your strengths vs. the firm's needs. Do your particular strengths align with the need in your firm? Are you a change agent, an ambassador or a financial hawk – and what does your firm need right now?

Let's look at this through the lens of leadership style. We all have a natural style that has developed through work, community service and life. Are you a driver or pace setter? Or, are you a visionary, a consensus builder or, are you a coach? Are you a patient communicator who can help the firm heal following a rough patch? There is a time and place for each of these leaders but a particular style at the wrong time can spell disaster.

Should you step into a role with the benefit of awareness of your strengths aligned with the firm's needs, consider how you will go about developing versatility. You can't get from the tee to the green with one club or, as the saying goes, if you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. So it is with leadership style and your challenge, with the benefit of a healthy dose of self-awareness, is a plan to develop knowledge and skills to draw upon as the role unfolds.

Taking on a leadership role is truly service to the firm. Depending upon the size of the firm and the role, you may need to give up some or all of your client responsibilities. In a relatively mature or flat market with increased competition, giving up your client responsibilities can be at great personal and professional risk.

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What is the term of the leadership role? How much of your practice can you retain? How do you choose which clients to keep and which clients to delegate to others in the firm? How will the clients react – will they stay with the firm? How will you be rewarded and for what? How will your partners measure your success and in what time frame?

On the home front, is this the right time, for example, to perhaps increase your travel schedule? Is this role intriguing because your practice is waning or because you are getting a bit bored? Will this be the new challenge you need to reignite your professional fire?

Finally, start with the end in mind. The aftermarket for law firm managing partners is limited or non-existent. Unlike a leadership role in the corporate world, law firms don't often go the market looking for leaders – they look within for people who have earned the opportunity to influence by modeling success. Client team leaders may position themselves for a senior in-house role and practice group leaders can be recruited to change firms with their practice group in tow – but these are very rare.

Before taking on a significant leadership role mid-career, you want to be confident that the firm will support you as you rebuild your practice when your term is over. How will you gain the business acumen, financial and leadership skills to be successful in the role? How will you stay at the top of your game in terms of expertise and how will you rebuild when your term is over? What do you want your legacy to be?



Taking on a leadership role in your firm can be one of the most challenging, frustrating, rewarding, stressful, gratifying experiences of your professional life. If you are the right person at the right time it can be great fun. If you are the right person but at the wrong time for you or for the firm – well you get the picture. Consider it carefully and if the informed decision screams yes – then go for it.

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