

1 of 2 DOCUMENTS

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Crain's Cleveland Business

December 5, 2011

SECTION: Pg. 13 Vol. 32

LENGTH: 1024 words

HEADLINE: Managing partner title harder to define in a few words;
Leaders' roles expand as organizations adjust to new industry realities

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BODY:

Ira C. Kaplan thought he had the wind at his back when he became managing partner of a local law firm in January 2008. Business had boomed the year before.

In retrospect, the leader of Benesch, Friedlander, Coplan & Aronoff LLP characterizes his debut as "walking into a tsunami."

Months after Mr. Kaplan became the attorney responsible for running the firm while maintaining a book of business, The Great Recession began, hurtling challenges at him he hadn't anticipated.

He and other managing partners continue to grapple with added pressures.

A survey conducted in April and May revealed that law firm managing partners and chairs across the country are concerned about pricing pressures, erosion of demand, continuing growth in profitability and the retirement and succession of Baby Boom lawyers.

"Being managing partner is a lot easier when everybody's making plenty of money," said Eric Seeger, a principal with Newtown Square, Pa.-based Altman Weil Inc., the legal consulting firm that conducted the survey. "When money gets tight, minor issues become major, and major issues become life-threatening."

Today's firm leaders are questioning their service delivery models and seeking ways to improve efficiency, Mr. Seeger explained.

Perhaps this is a sign of how daunting leading a firm is today: Altman Weil is working with a number of firms that need to transition to the next managing partner but are having difficulty finding candidates willing to do the job, Mr. Seeger said.

'Multi-ring circus'

Even in better economic times, the role is a challenge. At the same time managing partners are tasked with running a firm, they also serve clients.

James Aronoff cites Oct. 28 as a prime example. Mr. Aronoff, who became partner-in-charge (or local managing partner) in Cleveland for Thompson Hine LLP on Jan. 1, had spent months, probably a year, planning the firm's annual lawyers meeting in the city.

Mayor Frank Jackson was scheduled to greet some 350 people at 4 p.m. that Friday.

The phone rang at 1. A local company had just finished negotiating the terms of the sale of a couple properties it had developed and would need a draft of the deal documents by Saturday morning.

Managing partner title harder to define in a few words; Leaders' roles expand as organizations adjust to new industry realities Crain's Cleveland Business December 5, 2011

Mr. Aronoff gathered a team to handle the matter and, with a couple minutes to spare, arrived to greet the mayor and introduce him to the lawyers. Later, Mr. Aronoff returned to finish initial drafts.

"It was classic, it really was," Mr. Aronoff said of the day's "multi-ring circus."

"The biggest challenge is time and time management," said Mr. Aronoff, who oversees approximately 330 people in Thompson Hine's largest office, including 130 lawyers. "From my perspective, to manage an office of our size, to do it right, is effectively a full-time job. To practice and serve the clients that I serve in a way that I would like could also be a full-time job. So the biggest challenge has been figuring out where to find that balance."

Naturally, a managing partner ends up spending less time on client matters.

"You really don't have a choice," said Mr. Kaplan, who oversees seven Benesch offices and approximately 350 staff and attorneys.

As Mr. Kaplan's days have involved more travel and strategic planning, other partners have assumed added responsibilities and stepped into relationships with firm clients, he said.

Never-ending job

Orchestra leader and team psychologist are two descriptions Larry Oscar gives the job he, too, performs.

Mr. Oscar, who's CEO (in essence, managing partner) of **Hahn Loeser & Parks LLP** in Cleveland, measures his success, in part, in the growing number of projects the firm, which employs 267, is being hired to handle.

"Those things don't happen without tremendous amounts of teamwork," he said.

Mr. Kaplan accepted the reins of Benesch with the goal of helping it reach the "next plateau" through growth and "hopefully effective management."

The firm was among many to reduce its spending and to cut staff and compensation after the economic downturn.

"That was not fun," he said. "A lot of really wonderful people ... were affected in not a good way."

Another challenge to the job, Mr. Aronoff said, is managing dozens of partners, many of whom, if not all, want a say in decision-making. To tackle the challenge, he has worked to improve communication and collaboration.

Today, as he enters his fifth year as managing partner, Mr. Kaplan is proud of the way Benesch is implementing its strategic plan. He notes, for example, how the firm closed a merger with an Indianapolis firm in March 2010 and has completed a lot of lateral hiring that has been accretive to the firm.

"I think it's exciting because you can make a difference in your business," Mr. Kaplan said of being managing partner.

"The job's not done by any means," he added. "Never. You can't be complacent about how you run your business. It's a constant effort to try to be better tomorrow than we are today."

A penny for her thoughts

For Anne L. Meyers, the job is done.

Ms. Meyers shed her managing partner title in September after 17 years of leading the small firm she founded, Meyers, Roman, Friedberg & Lewis in Woodmere.

It has been an interesting transition to no longer be responsible for what needs to happen, she said. Indeed, a friend gave her a piggy bank, and Ms. Meyers inserts coins when she's not minding her business. She put in a handful of quarters the first week alone, she admitted.

But don't let her piggy-bank deposits fool you: This former managing partner is glad not to wear that hat anymore.

"I now have the benefit of being able to practice law ... without having to carry the weight of the day-to-day and the ongoing responsibility to manage the firm," she said.

Her successor, Peter Turner, has found his first three months on the job "extremely demanding," particularly mastering the juggling act between managing his law practice and the firm. He doesn't take for granted that Ms. Meyers is around, and consults with her probably weekly, he said.

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"She formed the firm and has been managing it since 1995," Mr. Turner said. "So she's been there, done that.

"There's a lot to be done," he added. "It's a learning experience. I've got a lot to learn; I know that."

LOAD-DATE: December 8, 2011