

### THE MAKING OF A LEGAL LEADER

#### Bringing three very different professional experiences to the table

Having worked at and managed a small law firm; then led a medium-large commercial law firm; then spent time as a capital partner of a large law firm; then back to managing a boutique law firm, gives Mark Hamilton, managing partner of Grope Hamilton Lawyers, an insightful background.

“It takes a whole raft of skills and accumulated experience to be an effective law firm leader, including business acumen, high-level people skills, good strategic and planning skills, and an understanding and interest in developing processes and systems”.

Hamilton says that any young lawyer aspiring to lead a law firm should aim to get, at the minimum, undergraduate economics or management qualifications or, preferably, post graduate qualifications in economics and business management.

#### Leadership challenges

Hamilton says that the day has passed where legal partnerships simply look around for the best lawyer to take on practice management.

“The person in the firm who may make the best legal leader may or may not be the ‘best lawyer’, although it is probably conversely true that lawyers with good leadership potential are probably strategic and highly effective as problem solving lawyers. They may or may not be the most academic in a technical sense”.

“Managers require a broader, more educated skill set to deal with the increasing rate of change in the professional services market with vastly increased competition, demographic changes, competition for legal talent and the need to economise to maintain margins”.



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## **Leadership is obvious in the school yard**

Hamilton says that, in general, the characteristics required of a good law firm managing partner are part of the innate makeup of the individual.

“We all saw them in the school yard. *The kid who demanded respect and cooperation of the other kids and organised games and activities.* The sort of kid who led and the other kids followed”, Hamilton says.

Hamilton says it is crucial to be flexible in your leadership style, for example, knowing when to lead from the front, when to jog alongside or when to get in behind. Hamilton says this is fundamental, given that you are working with professional colleagues.

“The old adage is that managing lawyers is like herding cats”.

Hamilton says that, whilst it is tried, a corporate leadership model cannot often be readily or successfully replicated in a legal partnership, even if many lawyers are not actual owners of the business, as they may aspire to be.

## **The need for a strong practice background**

“Leaders in law firms traditionally have as strong legal practice background, with good reason”, says Hamilton.

Hamilton says that professional management goes hand in hand with practice management because many issues facing lawyers within the firm, requiring management, relate to managing the legal matter itself, as well as the business side of the relationship with the particular clients.

“You often need to understand the legal matter, as well as the lawyer in question, so that you can judge what is likely to happen, in order to help the lawyer manage the money or business side of the file or engagement with the client”.

## **Legal leaders often self select**

Hamilton, who has practised extensively in the primary areas of commercial transactions, commercial advisory and commercial disputes notes that professional acceptance and respect within a firm typically enables promotion to leadership in the first instance.

“It gives you a unique perspective when, as I was, ‘elected’ by a group of partners to run a practice of 68 people, and can be ‘unelected’ at whim. You are definitely not ‘Lord of all you survey’. It is not like running a commercial company, in any sense”.

## **Life a continuing education process**

“The notion that lawyers are too busy to improve leadership skills is a false proposition”, Hamilton says.

Hamilton, who has a Master of Laws (Commercial), Master of Business Administration and Master of Business Research, and who is a long term avid reader of business

books and articles covering such fields as economics, management strategies, marketing, services marketing, coaching and emotional intelligence, says that young lawyers, who aspire to be managing partners, need to make time to read and attend courses and seminars.

“I cite myself as an example”, he states. “I have always run a busy and robust practice where I do a lot of work myself; however, I want to keep learning to be a better lawyer and leader, so I have always taken the time to undertake a number of post graduate courses in law and business at the University of Adelaide”.

Hamilton says this helps avoid learning from the “school of hard knocks” in that it helps making avoidable errors.

### **Common errors of managing partners**

“Not being yourself is a common and potentially fatal error”, Hamilton says. “The reason you are in the position is probably, largely, because of your mix of personality traits, so whilst law firm managers should be open to developing new skills and processes, they should remain true to themselves”.

“One of the most important things to realise is that attempting to impose a “one size fits all” mentality on a collection of lawyers is a recipe for disaster”.

Hamilton says that, in the end, a law firm, whatever its capital structure, is ultimately a collection of separately admitted and licensed lawyers who are prepared to work together collegiately, and who, in reality, have multiple career choices if they do not believe in the leader and the firm’s direction.