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## **The New Partnership Criteria: The Personality of Success**

By Susan G. Manch

Law firms are making partners again. The continuing strength of the legal services market has allowed firms to relax ever so slightly and begin to think about expanding their ranks to meet current and future demand. In tandem, associates are once again working to unravel the mystery of who will make partner and why. In some ways, it remains the same as it always has been; in other ways, there are signs of a subtle shift in the skills and personality traits that senior partners value as they consider who will be chosen to join the partnership.

Traditionally, the most consistent criteria applied by firms to associates under consideration for partnership are evidence of intellectual capability and demonstrated legal skill--both core skills and expertise in their specific practice area. In addition, there are several other standard measures of performance that are applied to determine fitness for partnership. In the 1992 monograph published by the ABA's Law Practice Management Section entitled, "*Making Partner, A Guide for Law Firm Associates*," author Robert Michael Greene offers this representative list of typical partnership criteria:

- Hard work
- Good work
- Client-handling skills
- Maturity
- Public profile
- Collegiality
- Entrepreneurial attitude
- Client development

This list is consistent with the basic criteria applied to most lawyers who are under consideration for partnership. In most cases, firm leaders could search for and find reportable evidence of the presence or lack of these attributes among candidates under consideration. Over the years, one area of strength or another may be considered more important. A recent example is the focus of many partnership committees on the ability of a lawyer to develop business or market their practice successfully. Evidence of this ability has been given much greater weight in the decision-making process at most firms than it had been in the past. Hard work, on the other hand, is now often considered a given, with only the most outstanding billable hour records being worthy of note. The criteria of this sort are fairly standard from firm to firm.

But there are signs of a shift in attitude, within some firms, regarding what is important. Senior partners in firms today are faced with a management crisis. Each year, as a now nine-year old trend continues, fewer law school graduates choose private practice as their first place of employment after law school. Among those who *do* choose a law firm, partnership is often not his/her ultimate career goal. Attrition

rates among mid-level associates are higher than they have ever been, and the costs of replacing those who have left rise every day as firms compete among themselves for the star (and sometimes even the not-so-stellar) laterals. The underlying reason for this crisis, say associates, is the lack of good people skills among partners. Associates say there is no mentoring, little training, and poor communication between the partners and associates, sometimes even among the partners themselves. Exit interviews with departing associates are filled with management horror stories.

And some firms are listening. They are beginning to look at the next generation of partner candidates in a slightly different light. They recognize that these lawyers will have new and different challenges ahead of them as they take over the reins of firm management. Firm leaders are struggling to determine how to define and identify the talents that will be necessary for continued success and profitability of the firm's practice.

Success in the practice of law today requires an impressive array of knowledge and skills. But how do firms go beyond traditional criteria to identify the personality characteristics that make a lawyer someone who will truly be respected, who will provide the firm's next generation of leadership, or who will become the role model associates seek as a mentor? Often, committees charged with the important responsibility of making these difficult decisions will say it is a "gut" instinct about these less measurable qualities that guides them to vote yea or nay.

The decision-makers are trying to find evidence that a person can lead, motivate, and manage people effectively. Even though they believe it is instinct that guides them to the right candidates, they are applying another set of criteria to these candidates--a set of standards applied more subconsciously than consciously. These criteria are the same ones most of us apply, without thinking, to those around us as a means of determining whether that person will be someone with whom we will want to spend time, share information, or otherwise interact. They are looking for that elusive personality of success.

The personality of success is harder to define than being a good legal writer. Finding proof of being inspiring or recognizing an affinity for managing people is not an exact science. Associates can tell you what makes a good manager, though. They tell me every time I ask them to describe a partner who has made a difference in their career. They talk about attributes like these:

**Listening:** People who really listen and who care about what others have to say. Stephen Covey, in his book, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, calls this habit number five, "*Seek first to understand, then to be understood.*"

**Setting and meeting goals:** Those who are able to set and meet challenging goals, both personal and professional. People with the ability to organize and control their work on a day-to-day basis and yet remain able to focus on a long-term plan.

**Decision-making:** Someone who can make a decision and set about implementing it. A person who knows when there have been enough committee meetings, studies, and input gathering, and who is willing to take the lead and move forward.

**Coaching:** Individuals who coach, counsel, and advise because they enjoy it. Those who understand the importance of 'pushing down' challenging work, of being open to questions and alternative ideas, and of providing guidance on all sorts of issues faced by new lawyers in an unfamiliar culture.

**Being a change agent:** Someone who understands the need for and embraces the process of change, while having the patience to work with those who need to be convinced and reassured.

**Reaching for exceptional performance:** A person who sets higher standards for him/herself than any organization ever could, partly because she enjoys what she is doing. Someone who never stops learning or reaching out for new ideas.

**Communicating:** People who say "Thank you," "Good job," and "Need a hand?" on a regular basis. Those with a knack for being able to get their ideas across without being pushy. Those who understand that communication is a two-way process, and employ that understanding in their dealings with people at all levels.

**Team Orientation:** Those who think of themselves as a part of a team and consider the ways in which their actions will impact on other team members. Those whose philosophy is inclusive rather than exclusive.

The qualities the associates describe to me are the foundation for success in any person. In the future, I believe having these attributes will be considered equally as important for partners as having exceptional legal skills.

Refusing to recognize this trend may be costly. As the practice of law becomes more of a business, practitioners need to think more like business managers. The intellectual capital of a law firm is its largest asset and it only makes sense to reward those who protect and develop that asset. Few partners are truly gifted by nature with these types of skills. Most of those who have them had to work hard to attain them--to learn how to train, develop, and manage lawyers more junior than themselves. One partner I spoke with told me that he had honed his management skills as an officer in the military, "One of the first lessons you learn is that as the leader, you are the servant of those you lead. You have to give them a reason to follow you."

A continued lack of mentors or coaches in firms will undoubtedly send more associates running for the door, and in ever increasing numbers. The motivation to develop a standard of excellence among partners for people management exists in the attrition figures of most large law firms and the attendant costs of that attrition. The August, 1996 issue of *Compensation & Benefits for Law Offices*, sets the first year costs of an associate, exclusive of salary at \$126,250. With first year salaries at D.C.'s top firms sneaking past \$82,000 this year, the cost of losing an associate after one year is over \$200,000, and that number only grows as the lawyer becomes more senior and more profitable.

The responsibility for promoting the importance of a new personality for success lies not only with senior

partners. Associates who consider partnership their ultimate goal should pay heed to both lists of skills and abilities. Sometimes, it makes sense to sit down and take a hard look at yourself. David Maister, in his book, Managing the Professional Service Firm, counsels lawyers to "debrief" themselves on the state of their asset, namely themselves. Take stock of where you stand with yourself, your practice team, your clients, and your peers. Ask yourself what image you are sending to those with whom you work. The track to partnership is often seven to ten years. Even lateral hires must usually practice in a firm two to three years before they may be considered for partnership. There is plenty of time in which to make an impression. Associates who hope for partnership should not only consider who is successful in the firm, but to whom do they give their respect.

Legal skills and the ability to bring in clients will still be the first line of criteria applied to candidates for partnership in most firms, but increasingly firms will have to look more closely at the people management skills of associates bound for partnership. Not only do associates demand it, but ultimately clients will be looking for these same skills in their chosen outside counsel. Rewarding those who inspire others has been the path to building a successful management team in many major corporations.

For those lawyers who say that the civility has gone out of the practice of law, I say take a look at what you reward. Behaviors follow incentives. If a firm rewards talented lawyers who are also good managers with partnership on a consistent basis, I can guarantee that future classes of associates on their way up will note that practice, and strive to develop the skills that are deemed valuable. There is no inherent incompatibility between having good people skills and having good legal skills. Lawyers too often fall back on the old complaint that, "*They didn't teach management skills when I was in law school.*" No, and most law schools still do not, but that does not mean these skills cannot be learned in the same way that a lawyer has learned to unravel vastly complex legal issues.

Over time, the personality of success in law firms may begin to take on a new look. Just possibly, promoting the importance of these personal attributes among firm members, in addition to excellent lawyering, may put some of the civility back into the practice of law and into life for associates in law firms.

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