COMING INTO LEADERSHIP

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LEADERS IN EXECUTIVE COACHING

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Here you are, the new department or division head. You feel justly pleased at being given the chance to show your skills at management as well as technical competence, and pleasure at being acknowledged by your fellow partners.

Now what? Many of Praesta's clients, new into this kind of role, quickly discover that the initial aura of elation and congratulations is over – often within 24 hours! Before long, they feel they are taking on "all the dross that no one else wants". An overwhelming sense of responsibility rises in them, an anxiety that they may not be able to deliver to people's expectations. And they discover issues, conflicts and scrimmages between partners that drain energy. In addition, many of the managerial tasks are new – and alien – to the new division head, who may not have received any training in management. Some find it daunting trying to work out what kind of manager and leader they want – or are able – to be.

Times are harder

Most firms had unparalleled growth in the "noughties". New leaders today have to:

- Manage performance more tightly
- Deal with fee pressure and tougher competition
- Manage the morale of partners and professional staff who have seen their clients and sectors under pressure, their personal earnings drop and their firms implement unprecedented redundancies.

In our work with senior partners, managing partners and department heads, we have been able to observe what works in this new situation. Success seems to come from developing what we call "disciplines" that are different from the skills it took to be a successful solo partner. The overarching theme, whether the person's background is in law or accountancy, is to make the move from being a solo practitioner to becoming a leader.

From practitioner to leader

Focusing on own client	⇨	Focusing on own clients of the department
Being a successful solo practitioner	⇨	Promoting the firm
"Selling" oneself and the project team	⇨	Leading a team to perform

WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?

From working with people new to this role, we have distilled six “disciplines” that seem to ease transition from partner to leader. All are important from the start, but number one below is top priority:

1. Getting clear about what needs achieving

Those who step up successfully into a leadership role quickly get clear where they want to take the practice or department. They can articulate what issues need addressing and imagine where the department might be in 12-18 months time.

As they develop a plan, they speak to their colleagues to get to know their hopes and expectations. They particularly seek out the managing/senior partner to understand what he or she wants and how success will be measured. They clarify how the firm-wide strategy relates to their own part of the business. In the hurly burly of the early days of leadership, it is so easy to make assumptions about these things. That’s why it is important to talk to people. In addition, effective new leaders:

- Set some clear markers for success early on
- Do not try to make the plan 100% right
- Are prepared to change tack as they gain new knowledge and suggestions from their colleagues
- Know who, amongst the partners, needs to be brought along to make the intended changes possible.

2. Building trust, credibility and respect

On election or appointment, new leaders have a well of goodwill and respect from their professional colleagues. The most effective ones maintain the level of goodwill in a number of ways – they:

Do what they say they will do!
This seems simple enough but it is easy to over-promise.

Handle the matrix
A new leader operates in a matrix in which office partner, regional partner, senior partner and global practice leader all want to have influence. Effective leaders work out who is going to need most attention.

Connect to the firm's "bigger picture"
A head of department or division forms the connecting point between their new team and the senior partner. Sometimes this can feel like playing "piggy in the middle". The best leaders use this position to: (i) make "the big picture" meaningful to their team in the light of everyday reality, and (ii) reflect back their team's challenges to senior leaders.

Blended communication

A recently promoted practice head, with 150 partners, blended three forms of communication:

- A simple voice mail message to all partners – to break news (new clients), make requests or send out reminders
- Regional face-to-face quarterly meetings
- Monthly "same time" webcasts to all partners on updates and "state of the business" reviews.

Actively build relationships with partner

In large practices, it is hard to make real contact with all the partners. They are often with clients; they may be located in other offices in the country or round the world. Moreover, with full diaries, it can be hard to find enough time to spend with each individual. Effective new leaders dedicate time to be available to listen openly to partners in special forums. These range from a series of breakfasts / lunches / dinners with small groups of colleagues, to one-to-one meetings spaced throughout the year. There is no right approach – it depends what suits the new leader's personal style and the size and culture of the department or practice. It is particularly important not to let this tail off when market pressure increases – this is a time to stay more connected, not to become more remote from the partners.

It is especially important to develop a credible relationship with big billing partners, who are clearly

Openness around tough decisions

One client had to announce a second round of professional staff redundancies. This was a painful decision, particularly as he had led people to expect that the first round of redundancies would be it.

Admitting his error of judgement, he explained his decision (two large government contracts had been delayed). The professional staff, while dismayed, understood his rationale.

important to the success of department and practice. A respectful relationship means supporting their efforts while ensuring they are not solo practitioners to the detriment of the firm.

Make decisions clear and transparent

New leaders find themselves party to decisions on a wide range of topics, including hiring of associates, client resourcing, business development strategies, fee levels and partner election. Effective leaders let their colleagues know about each decision and the reason(s) for it. For a new department head, consistency, fairness and transparency are vital.

The will to delegate

One recently promoted divisional head found his biggest challenge was to free himself from the detail and from some of his own client work. This was essential to give him time to focus on leadership; but it also helped others to get engaged and take responsibility within the department. The new leader had to shift his attitude – he:

- Stopped believing he needed to have all the answers himself; instead he recognised that leadership is more about enabling others than being personally responsible for all the ideas
- Came to care less about what people thought of him; instead he dedicated time to building the relationships that would enable him to do the right thing for the business.

3. Developing a team

The third discipline for new leaders is about understanding the skills and strengths of the people around them, and thinking through what is needed in the top team. It may take time to assemble the team – time to identify internal moves and, if appropriate, bring in expertise from outside the firm. Here, some self knowledge is very helpful – drawing people into the team who might counterbalance the new leader's own strengths and weaknesses.

Top priority is putting in place individuals who can be trusted to run parts of the practice or department. The next task is to delegate. This sounds simple enough, but may require a shift of attitude.

It is easy to underestimate the time it takes to build a team that works well together. Professional services firms are full of very bright, independently minded people. It often takes patience, skilled listening and sensitivity to bring them together to work collaboratively. However, failure to do this will take a heavy toll on performance and morale.

4. Developing leadership presence

Many partners who assume management responsibilities for the first time ask "what kind of leader should I be?" Our work suggests that successful leaders address this point by:

Building on their own strengths

It is often tempting to look around at what others do and to seek to copy them. While others have good advice and tips, we find the best managers and leaders spend time thinking through their own strengths, values and priorities, gradually developing a sense of the leadership approach that will serve them and the firm well.

Integrating their management and client facing roles

It is tempting to assume that a practice leader must choose between their management role or continuing client work. Often new leaders find it difficult to succeed in both: retaining their clients takes them away from their internal leadership role; but on the other hand, giving up client work may mean losing credibility with colleagues and foregoing fulfilling professional work. Successful leaders develop strategies for staying connected to the market by remaining involved in certain types of business development – for example, reviewing client pitches or taking on a quality review role. This enables them to retain a client focus while delegating most client work to their colleagues.

5. Choosing battles

New leaders want to bring in positive changes, but sometimes they also uncover unresolved or festering issues. The most effective individuals focus on just three to four themes, topics or goals, and face up to unresolved problems. They choose which battles are most critical to the performance of their department and do not waste time on the unnecessary ones.

One issue that many new heads bump into is underperforming partners or partners whose performance with clients is good but whose behaviour is disruptive to others. It is often hard to confront poor performance and behaviour. No-one likes to ask a partner to step down. But new leaders who fail to work with the managing partner to confront such issues risk sending out negative signals on how they will run the practice and handle poor performance. Effective new leaders deal firmly but sensitively with underperforming and departing partners.

6. Finding oxygen

Every new leader faces days of stress. We have found that those who cope best are those who know how to maintain their own mental, physical and emotional vitality. They build in time for their "oxygen tent" or "oxygen pocket" – e.g. a hobby, a physical endeavour, a cultural interest or charitable work. Such an interest, separate from holidays and normal family activities, is refreshing and energising. For new leaders, it is an activity for themselves and no-one else. It can be thought of as a form of "enlightened self interest", providing a space for renewal in the hectic business of leadership.

Concluding thoughts

Demanding support is not a sign of weakness

The set of disciplines suggested here may sound like simple common sense. Nevertheless, our conversations with clients tell us these principles are profoundly important and easier said than done. That is why we call them “disciplines”.

As people “come into leadership”, they typically find themselves under pressure to make difficult choices and decisions from day one, in the midst of many competing demands. Moreover, many find the new role to be a lonely one and they may by nature not be used to asking for help or support. If new leaders are to develop the disciplines suggested here and make a success of their new role, what they need is reliable support – which invariably means trusted people to talk to.

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Praesta Partners LLP is an international firm of executive business coaches. Our services include one-to-one executive coaching, senior team facilitation and board effectiveness consultation. More information is available on our website: www.praesta.com.

FURTHER READING

Thriving in a Faster Faster World, Heather Dawson, Praesta 2007
Riding the Rapids, Peter Shaw and Jane Stephens, Praesta 2008
The Power of Coaching Top Teams, Jacqueline Scholes-Rhodes and Hilary Lines, Praesta 2009

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