



## Critical Leadership Requirements in Today's Crisis

Today, perhaps more so than ever before, law firm leaders are under pressure. As new and unprecedented world events arise on a nearly daily basis, law firms as businesses and service organizations require new, untested, and unproven leadership approaches. These approaches range from moving the firm's entire workforce to a remote working environment, to virtual people management, to remote staffing and team coordination, to creative and proactive client service and retention strategies, and to making hard business decisions to preserve the stability of the firm without a clear picture of what the future holds.

Without having previously led through a pandemic, we are operating in a 'learn as we go' environment. Firms that seek to emerge from the crisis well positioned will focus on two critical aspects of their leadership model: (1) frequent, cross-organization communication and (2) strength in both centralized and decentralized leadership.

### Frequent, Multi-Level Communications

As we embrace weeks of remote working, law firm leaders are keenly focused on finding optimal ways to communicate effectively with all parts of the firm on a regular basis. Scheduled virtual communications and messaging are now occurring at multiple levels on a weekly, biweekly and monthly basis, with various firm, practice, industry, and operational leaders connecting within and across groups and sub-groups. The goal for these communications is to engage members of the firm and help them feel connected to the organization, which may alleviate anxiety some firm members may be experiencing and contribute to higher levels of productivity and collaboration. Initial messaging topics of focus include proactive client outreach and retention strategies, workflow and staffing processes in a remote working environment, reports on business decisions the firm is making, and updates on the firm's financials. Some of this communication will also lean towards building human connection - to maintain the important relationships that tie people together.

Most law firm leaders have historically led these communications with at least a few other firm members in-person, even for firms heavily invested in video conferencing across offices. So, the fact that these conversations are now entirely video requires a new frame of mind. How should firm leaders engage the audience with all attendees participating remotely? What group size and composition allows for greater attendee interaction? How frequently should each group meet? What types of messaging will help motivate firm members and engage them in client service? These issues may seem like semantics. However, firms that approach communication strategically will gain ground during this time by building cohesion among firm members and keeping the firm's practice and client service top of mind in an otherwise distracting environment.

Some firm leaders have already reported that more frequent and structured video communications for practice groups and sub-teams during the crisis have improved teamwork significantly. Others leaders report that with all attendees participating remotely, their firms observe an 'equalization' among attendees, eliminating perceptions or realities of an 'us vs. them' mentality and creating a sense of a collective whole. In addition to group sessions, leaders are also now connecting 1:1 with group members for scheduled video sessions for a virtual catch-up. These conversations offer prime opportunities to discuss individual productivity and offer support. To some extent there are more face-to-face conversations (albeit virtually) now than there were a month ago.

Messaging and style are more critical now than ever before, and the alignment of messaging across the firm requires further coordination among leaders and groups. Firms that focus on communication will emerge from the crisis stronger, more aligned, and more able to adapt to future demand challenges and ongoing ramifications associated with the pandemic and the economic recovery.

### Strength in Both Centralized and Decentralized Leadership

Best practice law firm governance models have long called for both centralized and decentralized leadership through the adoption of strong centralized firmwide leadership roles, complemented by empowered practice or industry group

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management. That being said, many firms have struggled to achieve a best practice model, leaning more heavily into either strong firmwide leaders or experiencing inconsistency in the quality of decentralized practice or industry group leadership. Now more than ever before, law firms require strength at both levels of leadership. Firms that have historically relied on the strength of only one or two key firmwide leaders, or failed to empower practice group leaders, will need to dedicate coaching and support to strengthen and broaden leadership skills and reach to provide connection and direction.

Centralized Leadership: With clients and firm members experiencing high levels of uncertainty, central, firmwide leaders must demonstrate direction and provide a plan of action to guide the firm through adapting to changes in operations and the economy over the coming months. Firm leaders should be contemplating 30, 60, 90, and 180 day plans of action. These plans should include regular and proactive client communications and outreach, steps for the firm to adapt services and pricing to support client needs during the crisis, introducing or further implementing process improvement methodologies to enhance efficiency in service delivery and staffing, updating the firm's revenue and net income projections monthly to manage partner expectations and inform partners about the need for operational and staffing changes as the crisis evolves, and making difficult cost reduction decisions as needed.

Consistent with the pre-crisis environment, these areas of firmwide leadership focus require a cross-firm viewpoint, as centralized leaders must make decisions that impact lawyers and staff across offices and practice groups. However, today's crisis requires firmwide leaders to move quickly to develop and implement near-term plans over a period of days, not months, and to adapt these shorter-horizon plans and actions to respond to the changes taking place in the broader environment on a real-time basis. In the short term, this means helping them with their own pandemic responses to the greatest extent possible. Clients value firms who partner with them. Firms are even more attuned to client service today than a decade ago, but there may be more you can do to enhance value to your clients during this difficult time.

Decentralized Leadership: In light of firm members operating in such a dispersed environment, meeting the challenge of creating individual connections to a remote organization requires law firms to lean more heavily into practice and team-based management than ever before. For firms with larger practice groups, this will involve utilizing sub-groups or teams in order to engage lawyers and staff in smaller, more dialogue-oriented forums. For firms operating with a matrix approach of both practice and industry-based leadership, greater coordination will be required between practice and industry leaders to ensure coordination and avoid duplication of efforts. Decentralized leaders will be focused on team member outreach, client retention and service, staffing and workflow monitoring, information sharing on key issues and trends impacting client segments, identifying emerging areas of demand within the practice, changes in the delivery of services, and more.

This networked approach to management will enable firms to maintain firm member connectivity to their teams and the overall organization, while seeking to keep production on track, moving work around where possible, and ensuring that teams are coordinating messaging to key clients on how to help service their needs during this crisis.

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Law firm leadership has never been an easy job. Now, more than ever, law firms depend on the strength of leaders at various levels to provide direction, communication, and connection to the organization. It would be naïve to assume that all leaders will be able to meet these requirements without coaching, support, and assistance. Many leaders will need additional resources to effectively plan and execute communications and manage their respective groups. These investments will deliver long term value, as those firms with leaders focused on critical requirements will emerge from this crisis best able to respond to the changed business and world environment.

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