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50% of partner transitions are done poorly. Is your next transition at risk?

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My research into the legal industry in Australia through interviews with legal recruiters reveals that:

- Each year, approximately 300 law partners, transition from their existing firm to a new firm.
- Of those 300 transitions, roughly:
  - 50% are done, poorly
  - 25% are done, indifferently
  - 25% are done, well

If you're a partner, is your next transition at risk?

There are three, important relationships involved in transitioning from an existing firm to a new firm. The relationship between the transitioning partner and his/her current clients, between the partner and his/her current firm and, between the partner and his/her new firm.

Leaving aside the reasons for the high percentage of poor and indifferent transitions, this article focuses on strategies to improve the chances of making your next firm transition a positive one - for all concerned parties.

The key messages of this article are:

1. Plan for your interactions, with key people at your existing firm, and with clients.
2. Plan for your first interactions with people at your new firm.
3. Repeatedly ask what else you could do to make this transition successful.

1. Plan for your interactions with key people at your existing firm, and with clients.

Well before the time you'll inform your existing firm and your existing clients of your transition, plan a time-line for the process. Plan to understand the minds and emotions of the key people to maximise the success of every interaction.

Identify the key person(s) who will be effected by your exit from your existing firm. Make a sequential plan of who to talk to, what messages to deliver and what questions to ask these people.

Prior to each meeting, consider the following questions about the respective person and how answers to those questions can improve the agenda and outcome of the meeting.

'What am I trying to accomplish? How do I want the person to feel after the interaction? What particular anxieties might they have about my departure? How will I handle any anger or

resentment? What don't they need to hear? How should I arrange the interaction? When and where should the interaction take place?

What do I want the person to believe about me by the end of the meeting and how will I demonstrate this convincingly? If the meeting was successful, what would be a one to two sentence reason the person would give for its success, to a respected peer?'

2. Plan for your first interactions with people at your new firm.

Your first interactions with people at your new firm are important. Plan for these interactions with the same thoroughness you devote to your existing firm and to existing client interactions.

A study by Harvard University professor Nalini Ambady and University of California professor Robert Rosenthal, supports the importance of first impressions.

Ambady and Rosenthal asked university students at the start of a semester to view a two second, silent video clip of teaching fellows, and rate the teachers on a 15 item checklist of personality traits. At the end of the semester the students rated the teachers again on the checklist. There was a high correlation between the start and end of semester checklists.

Remarkably, students who viewed just a two second, silent clip of a teacher at the start of a semester formed impressions that were very similar to impressions of the teacher at the end of the semester.

The significance of this research is this. The perception a person obtains from a first interaction can have lasting effects on long term relationships.

Prepare for your first interactions and meetings with people at your new firm by reflecting on how you wish to be perceived by your new colleagues. Then consider how you will communicate, to match this desired perception.

An approach to consider for your new firm interactions is expressed by the following statements.

*'When we radiate warmth and acceptance, conversations just seem to flow. When we enter a room with a level of comfort and enthusiasm, we attract people towards us'**

Regarding perceptions, by chance I happened to observe a partner I am coaching, interact with a receptionist at his new firm. The partner spoke with a soft, timid voice. When I shared with him that his voice in the encounter, was more consistent with that of a junior lawyer – he was surprised.

Another important 'interaction' during the first days at your new firm may be a short introduction presentation - you want to/are ask to deliver - about yourself, your career, the value you bring to the firm etc.

One way to plan this presentation is with a, 'Message; Flesh-out the message; Repeat the message structure'.

Here is an example of language you can adapt for this presentation.

'Hi Everyone.

I am delighted to join XY. Let me tell you about my background and the value I bring to the firm.

(Message)

In a nutshell, the key messages are these:

Eight years working in the area of PQR; a passion for the complexity of LMN matters and broad, deep thought-leadership in TUV.

(Flesh-out)

Let me elaborate on those messages. (Here you'd give key examples/case histories of the key messages).

(Repeat message)

To recap, the key messages:

Eight years working in the area of PQR; a passion for the complexity of LMN matters and broad, deep thought-leadership in TUV.'

(At this point, you might include comments about your home life. For example:
'Let me tell you about my home life. I've been married to Q for 10 years and my children A and Z are 9 and 13. I'm an M tragic and I have a weakness for G&B.')

'I'm happy to answer any questions you have.'

3.Repeatedly ask yourself what else you could do to make the transition successful.

Through-out the transition process repeatedly ask: 'What else could I do to make this transition successful for all parties?'

The reason for asking the 'What Else Could I Do' question is that it will uncover small actions, courtesies, behaviours etc. that you can do, that might be the difference between a mediocre and positive transition.

An example from the world of advertising in the winning of a $10 million dollar piece of business in a competitive pitch, demonstrates the power of asking the 'What Else Could I Do' question.

The advertising agency in question, over time, had realised that in their pitches - in the minds of their potential clients – there **was often** no stand-out bidder on the short-list.

Therefore, in the team meetings in the 14 days leading up to this million dollar pitch presentation, **the pitch team repeatedly asked and answered the following question:** ***'What else could we do that our competitors won't do – to win this piece of business?'***

They generated numerous ideas and logged them on flip charts around the 'war room'.

A few days after being notified that they had won the lucrative business, the agency's Managing Director phoned the client and asked why his firm was the successful bidder.

The client said the following:

'Well . . . there was little difference between your agency and your competitors . . . each of you seemed equally capable of delivering the work. However, the deciding factor was this.

When I drove into your carpark at your office for your final pitch presentation last Thursday, you had erected on a post at one of the parking spots, a plate with my name on it, reserved for my car.
After parking the car, I thought to myself, hm, they REALLY want the business. That was the deciding factor for appointing the work to your agency.'

Now, the agency pitch team couldn't have predicted that a reserved parking spot would be the deciding factor.

But they did know, the idea came from continually asking the 'What else could we do', question.

What does this have to do with making your firm transition successful.

Simply this.

Through repeatedly asking the 'What else could I do, question' you'll generate numerous ideas. Many of the ideas will be of little worth. But there may one or two that prove invaluable.

When choosing to implement an idea/action or not, first ponder how the other party will perceive the idea. In the advertising agency example, the pitch team considered how the Managing Director would perceive his name on a post in the car park. After reflection, and discussing whether the MD would perceive the action to be cheesy or not, they decided to take the action.

Small things can make a powerful impact. For example, after telling a client about your transition you could send them a hand-written thank you card.

With your new firm, consider what types of industries/clients the firm is developing and what contacts or useful information you can provide in these areas.

Will your next transition be positive one? Considering and implementing ideas from this article, will increase the odds that it will.

Michael Kelly is a leadership communication trainer and pitch consultant.

Many leaders struggle to make an impact when delivering important presentations. Michael's one-on-one coaching programmes help leaders communicate their ideas and vision with confidence, energy and certainty.

Leaders who work with Michael deliver influential presentations, win more pitches and grow thriving careers.

To learn more about Michael's services please visit https://michaelkelly.com.au/ or phone 0418 215 049.

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