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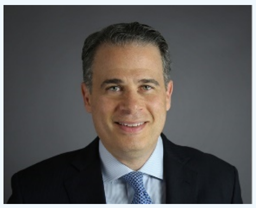
Looking ahead: how can an effective succession plan help law firms prepare for an uncertain future?



Scott Fisher, Managing Partner of US law firm Neal Gerber Eisenberg, shares his experiences of his leadership transition and advice for effective succession planning in a rapidly changing commercial environment.

The challenges of operating in the pandemic and post-pandemic environment continue to impact law firms of all sizes in new ways. As a leader of a law firm in a large US city, what are the unique challenges you have had to, and continue to, overcome?

As a business leader, supporting our people and our community is the absolute top priority. We have really focused our time, energy and resources to support the health and wellbeing of our people.

As a leader, I absolutely recognize how critical it is to create and cultivate a sense of community and inclusion during a time of unprecedented social isolation. Even something as simple as sending an email out each morning covering everything from what happened on this day in history, to book or magazine recommendations, to messages of thanks and support, helps to connect our team remotely and reflects those watercooler moments that we're missing in a virtual world. Since beginning as a venture before COVID-19, NGE's BeingWell initiative has also provided all of our team with bi-weekly events throughout the pandemic to support colleagues' wellbeing with sessions on everything from meditation and mindfulness, to connecting with friends and family.

We're not a grand monolith – intentionally. Our smaller headcount means we can make sure we're maintaining those personal touches and reaching out to our people to provide support as a collective, as well as, of course, working together to provide clients with more efficient, effective and fulfilling counsel.

Staying connected with your people has clearly been hugely beneficial for your teams and their own health and wellbeing, but as a leader, it's also important to maintain those connections to watch the growth and development of individuals throughout this prolonged period of isolation.

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What are the succession processes that your firm has in place? What measures have you taken to develop future leaders within the firm?

Being intentional about communication is an important way to ensure we're staying connected with individuals across the firm. It's about identifying opportunities to give partners exposure for their work and success, as well as their professional development. Communication is critical. It's about communicating with individuals and speaking honestly about their potential, about their future, about their opportunities, and how we can support them on that journey. I feel strongly that I must likewise be candid about areas for improvement.

Committee assignments are reviewed individually every year. We have integrated these reviews as part of the Mansfield Certification, which we are proud to have achieved for the second year in a row.

We now regularly conduct succession planning exercises at board level. During the pandemic, I identified all of the leadership positions within the firm and set the executive committee on an exercise to match candidates to the roles. The guidelines were very clear: think long-term, not necessarily who would be ready tomorrow; think of characteristics, not just who has the biggest book of business; and be mindful of your own biases, challenge your stereotypes. After regrouping over the course of two meetings, the exercise proved beneficial for the current leaders to check their own behaviors and look to the future in new ways.

We implemented a sponsorship program in early 2020, where select members of the executive committee were intentionally matched with a traditionally underrepresented partner, who may otherwise be overlooked due to unconscious biases. This was a conscious effort to expand networks and act as a source of advice and guidance. Although the prolonged isolation during the height of the pandemic made this program more challenging, it has not diminished its success.

We've also created business pods which matched three senior associates – younger up-and-coming future leaders – with members of the executive committee to focus on career support and their ability to grow their own practices. The ask was minimal, with no formal agendas and meetings of 30 minutes apiece. The program helped these future leaders develop their business development skills and their relationships with senior partners, with each other and, importantly, with clients. Clear facts and perfect scenarios are not representative of real business, so grasping the challenges and handling risks responsibly is absolutely critical to developing these leadership skills. Younger associates haven't had 15 years to learn from their experiences so exposure to the real world and balancing this with support is absolutely vital to prepare these future leaders for the real world and enable them to navigate it confidently when their time comes.

Aside from the top-down selection and identification process, having a structured succession plan provides ample scope and opportunity for future leaders to self-identify. Future leaders – whether selected or self-nominated – are developing their skills in a professional environment which champions growth, and this provides a more equal opportunity for future leaders to thrive.

The vision and values of the firm are people-centric. Ensuring that there is a platform and a process to recognize and develop talent is absolutely critical to upholding our values and commitments to our clients and our colleagues.

What defines a leader in your estimation, and what are you looking for in younger associates and partners?

Not every good lawyer is likely to make a good leader for the firm. Distinguishing leadership qualities is critical, and these qualities extend beyond subject knowledge and skill, to personal characteristics and values. You need to be disciplined in how you distribute your resources and direct your communication.

I place an incredibly high premium on the individual. Effective leadership requires empathy and integrity.

Although not all of my decisions go unchallenged, they are respected and supported. This is a testament to the culture of the firm, everyone feels confident to make their voice heard, but remain trusting in firm leadership.

There is no course at law school to prepare you for being the managing partner in a powerful and highly regarded law firm, from where did you draw the knowledge and gain the experience to do the job that you are currently tasked with?

My predecessor has the unique qualities of being selfless and self-aware. My own transition experience has been very influential on my perception of leadership.

Once the transition was complete, my predecessor left no doubt in anyone's mind about who the managing partner is and even now, while he remains an active partner, he has distinguished his new responsibilities very clearly and this definition and these boundaries have been important. He is dedicated to the firm's success and not his legacy. I have great admiration for him for that.

Preparing the firm for a transition of leadership is, although crucial, a portion of the process as a whole. An effective succession plan must also focus on maintaining client relationships.

How has Neal Gerber Eisenberg supported clients throughout the succession process?

As far as I'm aware, we were one of the first firms to implement phased retirement guidelines. This was an intentional plan to initiate conversations with clients and provide them with an assurance that active measures are being taken to manage the transition, and therefore maintain confidence in the continued service delivery.

Leadership needs to be available to clients. In a time of transition, unrest can ripple out to clients and as a leader, I see it as my responsibility as much as everyone else's, to maintain regular communication with clients individually, so clients are consistently engaging with a familiar face and continue to trust in the firm with their meaningful matters. These conversations also enable the firm to reflect on our service delivery and identify opportunities to improve and to take measures to attract, retain and promote the talent that our clients are asking for.

We're blessed with phenomenal clients, and they're willing to take the time out of their very busy working days to help us. This is quite remarkable, but I think speaks to the efforts we've made to engage with them beyond business transactions, to continue to communicate with our clients as people and have honest conversations about our service delivery. The nature of our business means that we do build robust professional relationships with our clients and we encourage our partners to ask 'how did we do' during end-of-matter conversations which although this may not come naturally, is becoming more organic over time. It's our responsibility to ask how we're doing; not for us, but for our clients. We need to understand how we can help our clients better.

These stories are shared with our team in our Town Halls, giving feedback to our teams, who return to their work with renewed motivation and the cycle continues to turn, more robust with every turn.

Although a business of intelligent people with horizontally diffused power can create a uniquely challenging environment, establishing and maintaining structured succession and professional development processes can cultivate a respectful, collaborative and industrious culture. This process, if successfully integrated and managed effectively, is stitched into the fabric of the firm and will continue to drive long-term growth for individuals and the business.

This interview was conducted by George Wolf, who is a member of Aon's Professional Services Practice and leads its Law Firm Advisory Team, which provides **management consulting solutions** to U.S. Law Firms.

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