

The 4 Traits Law Firm Leaders Value Most In A Partner

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (July 16, 2019, 8:13 PM EDT) -- Integrity, good communication skills, sound judgment and a collaborative spirit.

Those are the four qualities law firm leaders referenced most when asked, as part of an ongoing Law360 interview series, "What one trait is most important for a law firm partner?"

While legal expertise and having a large book of business are, of course, important, it was those more innate qualities that tended to stand out to top brass as being vital to the success and harmony of their firms.

Leaders from Greenberg Traurig, Morgan Lewis, Reed Smith, Littler Mendelson and a slew of other firms have responded to the question during Law360's Law Firm Leaders Q&As over the past year.

And, according to industry experts, the fact that their responses so often fell into those four categories was not shocking. Often, what makes a good partner is a person who can operate their practice smoothly, without creating problems for management and the law firm as a whole, said Ken Young of recruiting firm Young Mayden LLC.

Young is the former head of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP's labor and employment group.

"The 'perfect partner' keeps valuable clients happy and returning to the firm with new and profitable assignments, creates no internal issues with other partners, associates or staff, offers constructive solutions to firm problems, and interacts professionally and respectfully with lawyers at other law firms, judges and the community at large," Young said.

Still, what firm leaders are looking for in a partner really all comes down to personal preference and is distinct to each firm, said Chris Batz, a recruiter at The Lion Group.

"There are a million different ways to slice the apple when it comes to what managing partners look for in law partners," Batz said. "Every firm has a different culture and, frankly, they have different qualities they want."

Here's a detailed look at what law firm leaders said about the most important traits for a partner.

Integrity

Leaders from Irell & Manella LLP and Polsinelli PC pointed to integrity as the single most important trait for a law firm partner.

“Integrity, definitely. Especially for a firm like ours,” said Ellisen Turner, then-managing partner of Irell & Manella, in October. “We’re not a huge partnership. We rely upon and trust each other, and that’s necessary for our firm to be successful.”

And the need for integrity extends beyond the walls of the law firm and internal interactions, Turner said.

“When we’re known in the courts and the judges know they can rely on what we say and clients know they can rely on our advice and rely on us to put their interests first, then that’s how we differentiate ourselves. That’s how we stand out,” he said.

Polsinelli’s CEO and chairman, Chase Simmons, said he believes it is up to law firm partners to tap into their sense of right and wrong when advising clients.

“At the end of the day, I think our clients want to hear from us what’s the best way to get something done and also what’s the right thing to do,” Simmons said. “We need partners that are willing to tell our clients what we believe is the right thing to do. ... And when you start practicing with people that don’t think that way, it’s just no fun and it can cause a lot of problems.”

Good Communication Skills

When dealing with fellow partners, associates or law firm staff, and especially when dealing with clients, good communication is vital for a law firm partner to succeed, according to leaders from Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP, Barnes & Thornburg LLP and Thompson & Knight LLP.

One big way partners can communicate better is by becoming good listeners, said Thompson & Knight managing partner Mark Sloan.

“I think too many times people are too focused on getting their own message out that they don’t stop to listen. And part of having good communication skills is you have to listen, and try to respond to what the person is saying to you,” Sloan said.

Another important attribute of good communication is simply to make sure it’s done verbally and in-person more often, said Barnes & Thornburg managing partner Robert Grand.

“A lot of clients don’t want to read a 17-page email, they want someone to call them and say, ‘I understand your problem, here’s what I think we should do,’” Grand said. “That presentation to them is very important.”

According to Young, law firm bosses want partners who keep major clients happy, which means strong communication and no surprises when it comes to case results or billing.

"If they don't, management has to get involved with the unhappy client and the client may still leave the firm," he said. "Good clients have many other law firms wanting their business and don't need to put up with poor quality work or excessive billing."

Morgan Lewis chair Jami Wintz McKeon stressed the importance of being able to build strong relationships when she reflected on important traits for law firm partners.

"Law firms don't sell widgets. They have their legal services that they offer. As a partner, what you need to be able to do is build and foster relationships," McKeon said.

Sound Judgment

Being able to make judicious decisions in a variety of contexts is an important skill for law firm partners to have, said Greenberg Traurig LLP CEO Brian Duffy.

"Professional judgment. Personal judgment. Client judgment. Having the ability to be a trusted adviser to valued clients. The one thing that gets people there is great judgment," Duffy said.

Judgment can have many implications and applications, said Philip Inghima, chair of Crowell & Moring LLP.

"When I think of judgment, I think of someone who has empathy, someone who has discernment, someone who will always push himself or herself in a healthy way to achieve at a high level," Inghima said.

It also means partners knowing how much to ask of colleagues and those working under them, he said.

"I think having the judgment and perspective to understand that partners are leaders in a firm and have to sometimes lead by example and sometimes lead from behind by providing opportunities for others and being their support" is the most important trait, Inghima said.

And judgment often goes hand-in-hand with bravery, the quality that Littler Mendelson PC co-president Jeremy Roth selected.

"Clients don't tolerate much any more [of outside counsel saying], 'On the one hand, here's a legal risk, on the other hand, here's a risk.' They really want more business guidance. They'll make the decision ultimately, but they want [their lawyer to have] the bravery to take a position on the business solution," Roth said.

A Collaborative Spirit

No one quality was mentioned in the interviews with law firm leaders more than "collaborative."

"I think a good law firm partner is collaborative and collegial," Pryor Cashman LLP managing partner Ron Shechtman said. "And what I mean by that is one that takes advantage of working with colleagues and gains the strength of collaboration with other good lawyers and using the experience and intelligence of the team to help with a matter."

Collaboration is especially important in large law firms with numerous offices and where work is often originated in one office and performed in another, said Ogletree Deakins Nash Smoak & Stewart PC managing shareholder C. Matthew Keen.

“Our lawyers must successfully collaborate both with their colleagues and clients to provide the type of exceptional service we demand,” Keen said. “We’ve got clients we perform work for in over 40 offices, and we expect those lawyers to work as a cohesive team to support the clients.”

Along with being adept at collaborating on work, firm leaders also said partners must have a team spirit mentality in which they work hard for the betterment of the law firm as a whole, rather than simply for themselves.

“Separate from substantive expertise, I think ambition for the law firm is an essential trait for a law firm partner,” Reed Smith LLP global managing partner Alexander Thomas said. “We want them to be ambitious for the teams they lead, for themselves, but for the firm first.”

That also means buying into the law firm’s vision and plan for the future and actively working toward those goals, according to Eric Lewis of Lewis Baach Kaufmann Middlemiss PLLC.

“I think that the most important trait one looks for in a partner is a large measure of commitment to the group and the group enterprise,” Lewis said. “That means sharing the work, looking at the work as not only my work but the work of the law firm, and being committed to what you do.”

Young corroborated the law firm leaders' emphasis on collaboration and a team-oriented outlook as paramount to the success of a firm.

Firm leaders want partners who do not create unnecessary internal issues that get in the way of the firm's work by focusing too strongly on themselves and their own goals, he said.

"Some partners think that just because they control a huge book of business and can keep major clients satisfied that it gives them a pass on internal firm rules and policies," Young said. "As we say in the recruiting business, the cost of turnover is way more than the salary involved, and if egotistical, arrogant partners are driving away valuable junior partners, associates and staff, management has a real dilemma to solve."

Keith Wetmore, a managing director in the partner practice group of recruiting firm Major Lindsey & Africa, said that, alongside the ability to collaborate, an ownership mentality in partners is vital.

"Does the partner wake up each morning worrying about what they and their firm will be working on next month, or next year? Do they view every project as an opportunity to develop their and their firm’s brand and market position? In today's competitive legal environment, having an ownership mentality truly sets star partners apart," Wetmore said.

--Editing by Aaron Pelc and Alanna Weissman.