Empson, L. (2015). Leadership, Power, and Politics in Law Firms. In: R. Normand-Hochman & H. Gardner (Eds.), Leadership for Lawyers. (pp. 89-102). Globe Law and Business in association with the International Bar Association. ISBN 9781909416789

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

EST 1894

City Research Online

Original citation: Empson, L. (2015). Leadership, Power, and Politics in Law Firms. In: R. Normand-Hochman & H. Gardner (Eds.), Leadership for Lawyers. (pp. 89-102). Globe Law and Business in association with the International Bar Association. ISBN 9781909416789

Permanent City Research Online URL: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/15430/

Enquiries

If you have any enquiries about any aspect of City Research Online, or if you wish to make contact with the author(s) of this paper, please email the team at publications@city.ac.uk.

Leadership, power and politics in law firms

Laura Empson

Cass Business School, London

1.   Introduction: the reluctant leader

Leaders, by definition, must have followers. In most studies of leadership, this statement is self-evident. Such studies assume that hierarchical relationships within organisations are relatively stable, and take for granted that the most senior people in an organisation have the formal authority to lead it.

In law firms, however, the distinction between leaders and followers is more difficult, as traditional hierarchies are replaced by more ambiguous and negotiated relationships among professional peers. As the client relationship partner in one global law firm expressed this to me:

Empson: Does anyone have power over you?

Partner: *Not as far as I'm concerned, no.*

Empson: Does anyone think they have power over you?

Partner: *I don't think so.*

In recent years, I have undertaken two major UK government-funded research studies into governance and leadership in global professional service firms. Through these studies I have conducted more than 400 interviews in almost 20 countries with leaders and partners from many of the world's leading professional service firms. These interviews have been supplemented by archival and observational analysis. With regard to the legal sector, through my research and consulting I have worked closely with 15 of the world's leading law firms in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

I have found that in law firms, which are filled with highly educated, independent thinkers, who do not like being told what to do, it is not easy to find lawyers who are happy to identify themselves as followers. Furthermore, finding lawyers who are happy to put themselves forward as leaders is even harder.

We tend to assume that the most ambitious people in an organisation will aspire to leadership roles because they crave the opportunity to influence decisions and exercise power. In a law firm, however, taking on a leadership position can potentially entail losing power. In any organisation, as in most areas of life, power comes from controlling access to valuable resources. In a law firm, or indeed in any professional service firm, the most valuable resources are specialist professional expertise and lucrative client relationships. Lawyers who take on major leadership roles necessarily reduce their fee-earning work and may find their hard-won client relationships migrating to their colleagues, or to other firms. By taking time away from frontline client work, they will struggle to ensure that their professional expertise remains at the cutting edge.

Of course the idiosyncrasies of each law firm's governance structure will determine the leaders' formal authority and the personal credibility of each individual will determine their informal authority, but the same basic conundrum applies. Individuals who take on leadership roles in law firms risk exchanging their most valuable assets (ie, their client relationships and professional expertise) for a title which brings with it relatively little formal authority but a great deal of responsibility.

2.   Extensive autonomy and contingent authority

Leadership in law firms presents a complex and fascinating set of challenges. These challenges are encapsulated in two interrelated concepts: 'extensive autonomy' and 'contingent authority'.

Experienced lawyers require, or at least expect, extensive autonomy. This autonomy is justified by the requirement for professionals to preserve the right to make choices about how best to apply their specialist technical expertise to the delivery of customised professional services. It is perpetuated by the fact that the core value-creating resources of a law firm – technical knowledge and client relationships – are often proprietary to specific individuals. In the very largest so-called 'corporate' firms, a partner's autonomy may be less than it was in the past, but it is still nevertheless considerable. As long as the delivery of a legal service requires considerable customisation, the senior lawyer delivering that service must be free to exercise discretion. So, while in the largest firms partners may increasingly be required to submit to formal performance evaluations and feel increasingly removed from the leadership of the firms, they nevertheless retain a high degree of operational autonomy.

Extensive autonomy is associated with contingent authority. In a law firm, senior executives are typically elected by their peers to formal positions of leadership and can be deposed at any time if they fail to retain the support of their fellow partners. While formal votes of no confidence are unusual in the largest partnerships, more discrete 'palace coups' are commonplace. As a result, senior executives can only lead by consensus and need to be acutely aware of the implicit power structures and shifting networks of influence among their colleagues.

As the chairman in a partnership I studied explained:

> *"My experience of authority is that it lasts about an hour if you stop refreshing it ... We've seen people get killed very quickly if their teams stop following them."*

In my book, Managing the Modern Law Firm (Empson, 2007), I described partnerships as the best means of reconciling, or at least attempting to reconcile, the tension inherent within any professional service firm between the needs of the individual and the needs of the collective. At the heart of this tension sit the leaders of the firm who must absorb, embody and resolve that tension. It is no wonder so many lawyers refuse to take on these roles.

3.   Leadership constellation: a plural model of law firm leadership

This combination of extensive autonomy and contingent authority means that leadership in law firms needs to be conceptualised differently from the way we typically understand leadership. To date, very little leadership research has been conducted in the context of law firms and most conventional approaches to leadership simply do not apply. Most studies of

leadership focus on the individual leader (eg, their personality traits and behaviours) but this conventional approach is not particularly useful when it comes to understanding law firm leadership.

Fortunately, a developing area of leadership research provides useful insights into law firm leadership. In recent years there has been growing interest among leadership scholars in what has variously been termed 'collective', 'distributed' or 'shared' leadership. In this plural conceptualisation of leadership, leadership roles are shared among multiple actors, and authority relationships are ambiguous and potentially contested. Unlike most conventional leadership research, a plural model of leadership views leadership as a collective process, unfolding over time and arising from the actions and interactions of a group of individuals. Leadership, in this sense, is not something that is done by people but something that happens between people seeking to influence each other. As a result, it can be more temporary, more insecure and more subject to negotiation than traditional individualised notions of leadership.

As part of my research on leadership in law firms, I developed the concept of the 'leadership constellation' as a means of expressing this plural model of leadership (see figure 1). Rather than view leadership as a quality that an individual has, or something that an individual does, the concept of the leadership constellation emphasises that leadership happens in the interactions between the key actors in a firm's leadership dynamics. In some firms this may be a very small group and in other firms it may appear more like a series of concentric circles. Whatever form it takes, the power structure which the leadership constellation represents is implicit and often highly opaque to those outside of it.

[[[INSERT FIGURE 1.]]]

Leadership is represented by the arrows that connect the members of the leadership constellation (ie, the processes of influencing), as much as by the circles representing the leaders themselves. As a senior partner in a law firm I studied summed it up:

> *"The interesting thing in this role [of senior partner] is that you find that you can't achieve anything except through other people ... You can only make things happen by essentially working with this group [of powerful individuals] who in turn influence the wider group."*

So who are these powerful individuals? In the context of a law firm the potential members of the leadership constellation are:

- Senior executive dyad – typically a managing partner and senior partner, or chairman and chief executive.
- Heads of businesses – leaders of major fee-earning areas such as specific practices, offices and market-sector groupings; many fee-earning areas may be excluded from the inner circle of power.
- Heads of business services – in some firms the chief operating officer, the chief financial officer or the head of human resources may have considerably more influence than most law firm partners; the partners may not realise this.
- Key influencers – these people have power derived from control of key client relationships, valuable expertise or a strong internal and external reputation; they might not appear on an organisation's chart if they have no formal role.

It is important to remember that members of the leadership constellation do not form a leadership team in any explicit sense because the constellation as a whole has no formally defined boundaries or overt identity within the firm – it can overlap with and coexist alongside formal bodies such as the executive committee or the board. The organising hierarchy within the constellation is opaque, and roles and relationships are negotiated between members as required. They recognise each other as powerful, but others may not fully recognise their power. Individuals within the firm may see themselves as leaders because they have important-sounding titles but may not be part of the leadership constellation because they are not recognised or accepted as leaders by their colleagues.

The leadership constellation therefore expresses the informal power structure of the law firm. An effective leader is one who is able to navigate this complex set of dynamics to achieve a particular purpose.

4.   Identifying the leadership constellation

In my most recent research study I asked interviewees to identify where they were placed within their firm's formal governance structure and informal power structure relative to other members of the leadership constellation. I asked them to identify specific critical incidents and then recall who had been involved in the process of addressing and resolving them, at what stage they had been involved and what had been the nature of their involvement. I sought to verify their recollections by comparing them with others' recollections. I then cross-referenced interviewees' statements with formal documentation such as minutes of board meetings and transcripts of conference calls.

I was seeking to verify individuals' perceptions of their position within the power structure, to identify who recognised each other as a peer, who they deferred to and who they felt was marginalised. I used this data to map each of the firm's leadership constellations. Figure 2 is an example of the leadership constellation in a major global law firm I studied.

[[[INSERT FIGURE 2]]]

As the senior partner in this particular law firm saw it:

> *"There's probably an inner core of leaders which is about fifteen, yes something like that, and then there's an outer core which is probably around ten or twelve people, so*mething like that.*"*

In fact, my research revealed that there was a hidden inner circle of around eight people in this law firm. Interviewees identified these people by observing who was invited by the senior and managing partners to key meetings (and who was excluded) and whose opinion the senior and managing partners sought at the earliest stage about the most sensitive issues (and whom they consulted at a later stage). As one practice head in this law firm described it:

> *"I would say there's sort of the inner group. There's one or two from [A] practice, me from [B] practice, one from [C] practice. This is quite sensitive; I wouldn't pass this on to anybody. I don't know whether this is accidental or on purpose but I think it's on purpose. There's [the* senior p*artner], there's [the* managing partner], then probably two from [D]*

practice. The other head of [B] practice is not included ... *The group doesn't include the other head of [A] practice, and didn't include my predecessor in [B] practice."*

So some practice heads considered themselves to be peers of their fellow practice heads and were unaware that they were in fact excluded from the inner circle. And there were some heads of business services (who were neither lawyers nor partners) who were closer to the inner circle than board members (who were both lawyers and partners).

5.   Negotiating leadership relationships

Even for those supposedly at the centre of power in this particular law firm, the power dynamics are complex and opaque. For example, all major practices have multiple leaders who negotiate shared roles as required. How then are the members of the leadership constellation able to work together so effectively? The answer lies in the concept known by sociologists as 'social embeddedness', which helps to explain the way in which deep social ties can influence supposedly transactional and rational economic exchanges.

Many partners in a law firm may have known each other for many years. They may have studied for their law degree together or trained together when they first joined the firm. They will have been thoroughly socialised into the firm so that they share many of the same values and the way in which they understand the reality of their business world has been shaped by the organisation which has been their home for the past 25 or more years. During this time they will have built up close working relationships which enable them to negotiate their shared role space through intuitive mutual adjustment. Or as two joint practice heads explain:

*"The reason it works for me and [joint practice h*ead] *is that we've worked with each* other for years and years and years. We like each other. We share the same values and we find the same things amusing by and large.*"*

"It's a very easy relationship. We're on a very similar wavelength. We seem to be able to anticipate what each other will think on things. *I don't know whether that is healthy or* unhealthy, but it feels quite easy.*"*

In many global law firms that have grown by a series of smaller acquisitions this social embeddedness exists for the partners of the legacy office (eg, the London office in the case of the magic circle firms) but not for the partners in other offices. This may enhance the effective functioning of the leadership constellation but may cause difficulties for those from outside the legacy office who seek to exercise power within the firm they have joined. Where a firm has grown suddenly as a result of a mega-merger between firms of similar size, the issue of social embeddedness may present a different kind of problem. The challenge then is how to bring together two potentially highly functional leadership constellations, where there are no long-established relationships, in order to create a new power structure which functions effectively.

But before members of the leadership constellation have the opportunity to engage in intuitive mutual adjustment, how can these individuals come to be considered as leaders or potential leaders? More generally, how does a lawyer become a leader? The following section deals with these questions.

6.   Gaining and retaining legitimacy to lead through market success

To be perceived as a potential leader in a law firm, a lawyer needs to gain the respect of colleagues through professional work. Few lawyers are happy with the idea of being led by someone who has not already done their job at least as well as, if not better than, them. As one practice head in my study explained it to me:

> *"I've dealt with some of our most difficult clients. So I've been the partner on [major client] having won that. I'm also still currently the partner on [major client] and that's not the easiest one either. And, even now I've become head of the practice, I'm just going onto [major client]. ... So if I put my little ego hat on for a moment I was sort of, you know, seen to be a good partner. You know, one of the top partners, I suppose, and one that can get out there and win work."*

However, it is a specific aspect of professional work that counts. While providing high-quality advice and delivering exemplary service are important ways of gaining respect, it is market success that matters most. According to another interviewee:

> *"I think a lot of the leadership in a firm is linked to your practice and the position in the market because those people have the credibility, those people are in the market, they actually know the client and so on and in the end all that we do is ultimately directed towards clients."*

Why should lawyers assume that, just because a colleague is particularly effective at rainmaking, they are in any way fit to lead their firm? My study suggests three important reasons why market success is taken to be an indicator of fitness to lead.

First, the ambiguous nature of professional work means that it can be difficult for lawyers to judge the absolute quality of a colleague's work. Market success thus comes to symbolise professional proficiency – a tangible measure of the intangible. By succeeding in selling work, aspiring leaders demonstrate to their colleagues that they are more than just highly skilled technicians; they have a broader understanding of their clients' needs and, by implication, possess the commercial acumen to lead their fellow partners to commercial success.

Secondly, the partners value an individual partner's commercial success because it will ultimately generate income for themselves. This is clearly most marked in lockstep firms but also applies in law firms where remuneration is more directly linked to individual performance. A successful business generator creates a halo effect for his or her colleagues, whether indirectly in terms of the reputational benefits for the firm, or directly in terms of passing on additional work to their colleagues. Those who prove they can feed their partners are also deemed to be qualified to lead their partners.

Thirdly, being successful in the market has strong symbolic qualities. It demonstrates to colleagues that you know what it means to work hard. You have already made the personal sacrifices that you will be asking of your colleagues. Demonstrating that you can bear the pain is the ultimate demonstration of authenticity as a leader – you have pushed yourself to your limit as a professional and you have earned the right to ask your fellow partners to do the same. Or as one interviewee explained:

"I think that professional service practitioners … will accept almost unlimited decision making and authority from someone that they think understands the things they are going through."

The leader has been through it all before. But it is not enough just to have done so in the past. Claiming or being granted the right to be seen as a leader is not a one-off event, you have to keep proving your leadership eligibility by continuing to be involved in winning business and working with clients.

One practice head in a law firm I studied contrasted his own experience with that of a less politically astute colleague:

"I did more billable hours than any other practice group head … I always find if you ask people to do something, you get a lot more respect if they think 'well he's doing it', so therefore they follow that. The banking guy who's very, very good, made a classic mistake of cutting right back on his practice and becoming full-time management. And that doesn't work in a firm like ours. You do lose credibility doing that. You have to be able to show you can still cut it."

As a lawyer in a management role, showing that you can still cut it and demonstrating your continual commitment to the firm is vital if your colleagues are to entrust you with formal authority to lead them. But that is not all. If you have been accepted as a leader in a law firm, you must capable of leadership – but only as far as your fellow partners will allow you.

7.   Enabling autonomy while retaining control

When partners delegate formal authority to one or more of their number, it is with the understanding that they will use it to achieve the partnership's collective objectives for the firm and further its commercial success. They are by no means promising unquestioning obedience or unlimited respect. Indeed, their tacit expectation is that their individual autonomy will remain unchanged. As one law firm leader acknowledged:

> *"You can't really tell people what to do. You can say what you're going to do and then* hope people will agree with it ... and the people you can least tell what to do are those who are most important for the success of the business. Because they are the ones who control the client relationships.*"*

Yet these firms are not haphazard anarchies, they are highly successful global professional service firms. The leaders do in fact exercise a degree of control but within certain constraints. Control focuses on ensuring that the activities of individual partners are aligned with the strategic goals and performance targets that have been agreed by the partnership as a whole, even while encouraging colleagues to believe they are exercising autonomy. As one chairman described it, leadership in this context is like:

> *"*walking a tightrope of helping my partners feel like owners, helping them feel involved, helping them be engaged, not dominating them, not getting out in front, not having a huge ego which makes them feel like the c*hairman's kind o*f off on his own trip. At the same *time, being strong and providing them with a sense of confidence that we're going* somewhere.*"*

Constraints on individual autonomy (ie, managerial discipline) occur within the informal hierarchy, with partners accepting a degree of control in the interests of the partnership as a whole. This balance between enabling autonomy whilst maintaining control can be clumsy and hard to maintain. As one senior partner explained:

"Partners say 'you're too tight' and they say 'get looser'. So you get looser and they say *'it's chaotic, get tighter'.* If the money is going up, you can do what you like. If the money *is going down, you can't do anything. But the money going up or down isn't within control* of the senior partner.*"*

Sometimes there are formal constraints, but the most powerful and effective controls are the desire to win and retain the respect of senior colleagues you respect by conforming to the norms of professional behaviour that they advocate and exemplify. In other words, professionals look to their chosen role models and attempt to act accordingly. As a senior law firm partner explained:

*"*I think the younger partners want you to spend more time (than them) thinking about what the firm as a whole is doing and ... to provide thought leadership which they will *either follow or not, because it's not telling them what to do; it's actually just coming up* with the prompts and ideas to maximise the business and get the best out of people. I think *that's what they expect some o*f the more senior partners to do. So it sort of happens.*"*

It seems that leadership in a law firm can be something that 'sort of happens'. Partners will be likely to cooperate as long as the prompts and ideas are not positioned as bureaucratic incursions or excessive management. This is the essence of the contingent nature of authority

in such organisations. Leaders have, in effect, a temporary mandate from their partners to interpret and implement partners' objectives for the firm.

It is important that leaders should not try to work alone in maintaining this balance. They are acting on behalf of the partnership and should not allow themselves to become portrayed as acting in opposition to it. As my previous research has shown (Empson, 2012), it is easy for leaders in this situation to become isolated. Instead, they need to enlist the support of their colleagues within the leadership constellation and beyond to help maintain the balance between individual autonomy and managerial control. They also need to recognise when it is time to act in order to exercise firmer leadership. As one interviewee explained:

> *"Lots of people here are crying out for leadership, you know, they just don't realise it. But* they are. They do what they do but if somebody could inspire them and show them there *was a better way of doing it, they'd follow that."*

But such overt leadership activity runs the risk of being perceived by partners as interfering with their autonomy and is likely to be met with resistance or disdain. Control of a partnership is maintained in more nuanced and less obtrusive ways and, accordingly, requires subtle political skills.

8.   Interacting politically while appearing apolitical

In order to be accepted as leaders by their peers, professionals must appear to be apolitical. But in reality politics is simply a fact of life in law firms, it is the oil which lubricates the wheels of everyday organisational interactions.

Many interviewees in my study said, unprompted, that they abhorred politics and insisted that their firms were not political. Admittedly, this is according to their somewhat naive notions of political behaviour. Interviewees seem to understand organisational politics in rather simplistic terms as self-serving, duplicitous and unscrupulous. According to one interviewee:

"To me politics smacks of alliance-building in the corridors, in offices behind the scenes. It smacks of people engineering agendas, which creep up on the firm and deliver a fait accompli in a way that becomes disruptive. Or politics could manifest as someone undermining another person. I would like to think we don't have those behaviours."

So lawyers who display these behaviours may be deemed by their peers as unsuitable for a leadership role. As another interviewee in the same firm explained:

*"There are people who are clearly very ambitious in the firm who will say from quite an early age to you, particularly over a beer or over a meal or over a chat [slams hand on table], 'Do you think I'm in the frame t*o be managing partner or senior partner? What is *it I need to do along the way?'... And they're regarded as quite pushy, will be more* political in their views in terms of what they think people will want to hear and what they think people will want to vote for.*"*

But how can someone become senior partner at a large law firm without learning how to negotiate between opposing partners, influence on a one-on-one basis and in large groups, take soundings among powerful individuals and build consensus across the partnership?

These actions require social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability and apparent sincerity – all key political skills.

This suspicion of political behaviour has a certain irony when you consider that the partners of the firms have explicitly and deliberately constructed political environments. They use political language, hold formal elections to senior roles and have candidates who issue manifestos and speak at candidates' debates. Senior leaders of law firms refer to their partners as 'constituents', and tell stories of rival candidates briefing against them and failed or successful leadership coups. Or as one interviewee described it:

> *"The previous election for senior partner was a bit of a power struggle between two individuals who were dominant characters within the organisation and [Fred] held sway on the basis of support from a number of the more senior partners including the outgoing senior partner who had quite a lot of influence… It was all closed doors* – smoke filled rooms – lots of politicking etc. etc. etc. – a variety of promises being made to various senior people to get them to support [Fred]*."*

Interviewees describe political behaviours as rife, but curiously do not interpret it as such. As one interviewee explained it:

> *"There was a time at a partner conference when I thought somebody was getting lynched. We were having a formal vote and discussion about electing someone to partner ... There were two or three people with a personal agenda, a particular dislike for an individual and they were trying to scuttle this person ... It was fighting

in public. I mean the way this firm operates it should all be resolved before you ever go in the room.*"*

In other words, the conflict resolution, trade-offs and compromises that inevitably must occur within a partnership were supposed to be made in private, allowing for a public show of harmony and consensus. This is of course a much more political approach than open disagreement during partner conferences, but it allows the partners to preserve the illusion that they are not operating in a political environment.

This apparent paradox (of denigrating political behaviour while creating structures which favour skilful politicians) can be reconciled by recognising that the more adroit leaders persuade their peers that they are not personally ambitious, even while they are climbing to the top of their organisations. These individuals appear to be ambitious for the partnership as a whole rather than for themselves (though, of course, the two are not mutually exclusive). Their peers are willing to cast themselves in the role of followers because they trust these individuals sufficiently to allow them a degree of formal authority over them. As one interviewee described it:

*"The partnership as a whole trusts our leader, that he's going to resolve it for the best – for the good of the partnership. As long as they believe that and trust that, then there'*s no reason to put any other kind of hold on him.*"*

In fact, interviewees sometimes described successful leaders as above politics entirely:

"Sometimes my sense would be [senior partner] doesn't necessarily always understand how influential he is. He's very modest about it, quite self-effacing, and he himself doesn't attach such great importance to some of those things that might be under the heading of *creeping as in slightly sinister. He is not himself a player in that way at all … it's simply* because his own motivations in this world are so, I think, very genuine and clean."

How can someone rise to be senior partner of a global law firm without being a 'player'? Is it perhaps that some of the reluctance to take on leadership roles in law firms, referred to at the start of this chapter, may be professed rather than genuine? After all, most senior leaders need to put themselves forward for election in the first place and in some cases fight a very tough campaign to be elected. But to win the trust of their peers, leaders must be seen as 'genuine and clean' rather than 'creeping' and 'slightly sinister'. That is, they should be looking out for the good of the firm rather than for their own self-interests. As one interviewee saw it:

"We have people in leadership positions who don't appear to be having to work politically to keep their position ... The one who does [leadership] more naturally, partners will recognise that, and [he] is more likely to sustain the role. And the others are more likely to crash and burn."

Yet individuals operating in a highly politicised environment who do not appear to have to work politically to keep their position are almost certainly deploying highly sophisticated political skills – whether utilising them consciously or not, and whether using them to fulfil their personal ambitions or their ambitions for the firm.

One interviewee, the global head of human resources in a law firm, who is not herself a partner, reconciles the apparent paradox of denigrating political behaviour while rewarding political skill within these firms as follows:

"It is important to distinguish between the sort of political ego, which doesn't work, and political savviness, which is absolutely essential. And that savviness is born out of empathy and the ability to see and absorb and understand what is spoken and unspoken, and what goes on sort of implicitly. I think it is critical in this organisation ... Without it you are in real trouble because if you don't have it you can't have influence."

It is worth recognising that this political savviness, and the political skills that underlie it (ie, social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability and apparent sincerity), are precisely the abilities lawyers need in order to handle their clients. In the client context they are not thought of as political skills, but just as being good with clients. This is another – albeit probably unconscious – reason why professionals infer leadership ability from market success. The client relationship management skills that make you good at winning business and retaining prestigious clients are the same skills that can make an effective law firm leader.

What makes an effective law firm leader?

It seems that leading a law firm can be reduced to three tactics:

- gaining and retaining legitimacy to lead through market success,

- enabling autonomy whilst retaining control, and

- interacting politically while appearing apolitical.

This suggests that perhaps it is quite simple after all. I would say, emphatically not!

To achieve market success, lawyers must have mastered their technical professional work and be highly effective at winning and developing profitable client relationships. To enable autonomy while maintaining control they must perpetually perform a delicate balancing act between being 'too tight' and 'too loose'. And to act politically whilst appearing apolitical, they must be able to demonstrate social astuteness, interpersonal influence and networking ability, while all the time appearing sincere. To achieve all this, to put in the hours required and not become discouraged by the scale and complexity of the role, requires very high levels of physical energy and emotional stamina. In a firm where your colleagues are highly driven and high-achieving, you need to remain just ahead of them to ensure they are achieving in the right direction. In a firm where your colleagues are not as highly driven and high-achieving as you believe they should be, you need to remind them continually of the goal you are supposed to be collectively striving towards. You must not lose faith in yourself or your colleagues when progress seems too slow.

So what sort of individual can effectively negotiate his way through the subtleties and complexities of a law firm's leadership? Looking across all of the firms studied, an effective leader should:

- be highly respected for his skills as a professional – especially business generation;
- not appear to be seeking power;

- inspire loyalty and commitment;

- have a strong personal vision and be able to communicate it;

- be able to build consensus and act decisively;

- transfer responsibility but intervene selectively;

- be comfortable with ambiguity and conflict;

- spend time massaging egos;

- not expect to have his own ego massaged; and above all

- be able to identify and navigate the leadership constellation.

A romantic ideal?

The plural leadership model typically found in law firms can be seen as the antithesis of the individual heroic leader, as mythologised by the business press. Lawyers do not like to see themselves as unthinkingly or even admiringly following someone who is out in front of them, winning the kudos and controlling their actions. Instead, they elect some of their peers into leadership positions, often for a fixed term, granting them the status of first among equals.

Yet, as they do this, they may be creating an alternative leadership mythology. Interviewees describe their leaders as self-effacing, modest individuals with 'clean' motivations who are above the political fray, reluctantly accepting office only because they are putting the interests of the partnership first. By perpetuating this belief in the purity of their leaders, lawyers are also reasserting their belief in themselves as autonomous individuals working within apolitical partnerships. The reality, of course, is far more grubby, complicated and compromised than that – leadership, power and politics inevitably are.

Selected references

Empson, L (2007), Managing the Modern Law Firm: New Challenges, New Perspectives (Oxford University Press).

Empson, L (2012), 'Beyond Dichotomies: A Multi-Stage Model of Governance in Professional Service Firms', in M.R. Reihlen and A. Werr (eds), Handbook of Research on Entrepreneurship in Professional Services (Edward Elgar), pp.274–296.

For details of ongoing academic papers arising from this study and other relevant research, see: http://www.cass.city.ac.uk/cpsf