

Who's Worrying About the Mental Health of the Law Firm Leaders?

By [Michael D. Short](#) on August 23, 2021

For months, every law firm leadership team has been navigating completely uncharted waters with respect to the impact of the pandemic on the practice of law, the business of law, and the mental health of lawyers and staff who were thrust into a remote/disconnected working environment. That's an incredibly tough initial task. Now, increase the complexity of these challenges by factoring in the impact of the Delta variant and changing federal and local policies on each firm's plans. The result is a target that shifts daily. Finally, layer on the fact that each and every plan, announcement, and revision is likely followed by a difficult, and sometimes snarky/rude/abrupt exchange with a few offended or inconvenienced Partners (or others) who cannot see or value the concept of "greatest good" here. As a result, each important email is sent with an inevitable level of dread.

Having dread (or feeling dreadful) isn't a healthy state of mind and it's exacting a severe toll on leaders everywhere. I hear the burnout and exasperation in law firm leaders' voices, questions, and comments. Being a Managing Partner in the best of times is a tough job. Right now, it just plain stinks and, as a result, I think we should expect an uptick in early turnover in these vitally important positions once the new normal comes into focus and the job of shepherding the organization through all of this is done. No one is worrying about these organizational punching bags.

A few specific examples I have experienced over the past few weeks include:

- An Executive Committee member who sent a policy change email on behalf of the E.C. watching, with a blend of exasperation, shock, and dismay, a flood of negative and sometimes personal comments within 10 minutes of the initial email.
- A Managing Partner who, after a minor surgical procedure, commented that being under anesthesia was the most relaxed, comfortable, and "at-peace" period of time he had experienced in over a year.
- A tough, younger, and very talented Managing Partner who, flat out, said he isn't sure how much longer he can keep going in the role.

Given the dearth of strong natural leaders in any cohort of organizations, including law firms, accelerated leadership turnover will be an unwelcome and sometimes perilous result of these organizational stressors. Therefore, as you react in real-time to a policy announcement, please understand that –

- Your firm leaders really are doing the best they can with the information they have.
- They are appropriately speaking with peers in other firms to try to create the group-effect in which lawyers take comfort.
- There is no time to vet ideas or discuss them as a partnership to reach a consensus, as some Partners expect for even the most mundane issues. Furthermore, a consensus may not create the best answer for the issue(s) at hand.
- All industry-leading organizations have great leaders. This isn't a job that should be rotated through the Partnership because everyone should have a chance. When a great leader is in place, never accelerate the turnover process.

- Perhaps most importantly, remember that these people are human beings with feelings and emotions (that they usually hide very well) so attacks from business partners, peers, and friends have consequences.

Before you send that scathing email, re-read it through an empathetic lens/filter. You absolutely have the right to respond. Just do it in a constructive manner that doesn't make your leadership team want to give in and give up. Some are thinking along these lines right now and such turnover, amid all of these challenges we face, should be viewed as a major potential threat and setback for your firm.