

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

Before appointing the next practice, office, or firm leader: what evidence do you have that they can lead peers?

The question is not whether a partner is excellent. It is whether the firm has evidence that they can lead at the next level.

Law firms recognize legal ability, commercial judgment, and client credibility exceptionally well. They are often less deliberate about establishing whether an accomplished partner can lead peers, make enterprise trade-offs, develop other leaders, and carry a priority through disagreement. That distinction matters, because a leadership appointment in a partnership is a business and succession decision, not simply a development decision — and when the transition goes poorly, the costs show up in client continuity, confidence in the leadership pipeline, and the firm's ability to execute its strategy.

In our work with partners making this transition, seven challenges surface again and again.

A note for managing partners, firm chairs, executive committees, and talent leaders.

THE SEVEN CHALLENGES

1. Leading people who don't have to follow. Law-firm leadership operates through influence more than formal authority. Senior partners bring established relationships, standing, ownership interests, and legitimate independent judgment — they cannot be managed like a team. What moves a partnership is trust, credibility, and the willingness of peers to act together, and a new leader has to earn all three while already holding the title.

2. Giving up the practice that made you. The role expands before the firm has helped the leader shift from personal excellence to enterprise leadership. The scoreboard that built their reputation — their matters, their clients, their judgment in the room — is no longer the scoreboard. Success now means creating the clarity, confidence, and accountability for other influential partners to act, including making trade-offs that cost their own practice something.

3. The bottleneck at the center. A successful partner becomes chair of a growing practice, and because their judgment remains central to its success, important matters keep returning to them. For a time,

performance holds. As demands increase, senior partners wait for direction, emerging leaders lack room to lead, and key relationships remain concentrated in one person. The issue is not effort. It is whether the practice can become stronger than the individual at its center.

4. Hard conversations with commercial consequences. Questions about clients, compensation, staffing, promotion, investment, and succession are rarely impersonal in a partnership — the person across the table is an owner, a colleague, sometimes a friend. Avoiding those conversations is easier in the moment and more costly over time. The cost of a weak transition is usually paid in slow motion: the deferred decisions accumulate quietly until they arrive as crises.

5. Precision that won't let go. The traits that make partners excellent are the traits that complicate leading: precision becomes perfectionism that will not delegate; skepticism becomes risk aversion that slows every initiative; self-reliance becomes a bottleneck. Work routes back to the leader because no one else's is quite good enough — and the partners around them stop growing into the roles the firm needs them to hold.

6. Consensus that isn't. Senior partners agree in the meeting and do not change their behavior afterward. In a partnership there is no command to fall back on, so the leader has to carry a priority through disagreement — testing whether assent was real, surfacing the objection nobody voiced, and holding peers to what they agreed. Many new firm leaders mistake a quiet room for a committed one.

7. Building the bench you never had. Emerging leaders in most firms receive too little candid feedback, meaningful responsibility, or sponsorship — and then are judged unready when a leadership seat opens. The partner making the transition has to develop other leaders deliberately, while their own transition is underway and being watched as the template. It is the challenge that decides whether the firm faces the next appointment with evidence or with hope.

BRING US THE LEADERSHIP TRANSITION THE FIRM NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND BEFORE IT BECOMES URGENT

We begin with a confidential working conversation about one live situation: a new or prospective practice, office, or firm leader; a successor whose commercial credibility exceeds the available evidence of peer leadership; a successful practice whose decisions remain too concentrated in one partner. We clarify what the role must deliver and where the principal risk sits, build usable evidence — confidential perspective, direct feedback, and assessment of readiness where appropriate — and support the work in real time, around live partner, client, governance, talent, and succession decisions. The work is developmental, not remedial. Purpose, confidentiality, and sponsor involvement are agreed at the outset.

Jeffrey Cohn and Dr. Carrie Muchow combine strategic judgment about succession, governance, and partnership leadership with behavioral assessment and developmental insight. Both remain personally

involved in the work, particularly where the individual challenge, the partnership system, and the firm's commercial priorities are closely connected.

Better leadership decisions are made before the transition becomes urgent.

Jeffrey Cohn

jeffrey.cohn@augustleadership.com | +1 917 690 0079

Dr. Carrie Muchow, Ph.D.

Bench Strength Advisors | bench-strength.com