

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. A leadership appointment in a partnership is not simply a development decision. It is a business and succession decision with consequences beyond the individual.

When the transition goes poorly, the costs eventually show up in client continuity, confidence in the leadership pipeline, and the firm’s ability to execute its strategy.

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

Leading lawyers is not the same as managing a team.

Law-firm leadership operates through influence more than formal authority. Senior partners bring established relationships, standing, ownership interests, and legitimate independent judgment.

Informal authority matters.

What moves a partnership is trust, credibility, and the willingness of peers to act together.

The leader is often leading former peers.

The task is no longer simply to perform well personally. It is to create sufficient clarity, confidence, and accountability for other influential partners to act.

Difficult conversations carry commercial consequences.

Questions about clients, compensation, staffing, promotion, investment, and succession are rarely impersonal. Avoiding them can be easier in the moment—and more costly over time.

The role often expands before the firm has helped the leader shift from personal excellence to enterprise leadership.

The cost of a weak transition is usually paid in slow motion.

Few leadership transitions fail in a single visible moment. More often, the practice continues to perform while the underlying risks accumulate.

- Important decisions and client relationships remain concentrated in one partner.
- Senior partners agree in meetings but do not change their behavior afterward.
- Emerging leaders receive too little candid feedback, meaningful responsibility, or sponsorship.
- Difficult talent, investment, and succession decisions are deferred.

A familiar pattern

A successful partner becomes chair of a growing multi-office practice. Their judgment and client commitment remain central to the practice's success, so important matters continue to return to them. For a time, performance holds. As demands increase, however, senior partners wait for direction, emerging leaders lack room to lead, and key relationships remain concentrated. The issue is not effort. It is whether the practice can become stronger than the individual at its center.

A partner's leadership challenge is rarely only a partner's challenge.

The work requires a view of the person, the partnership around them, and the practice they are being asked to lead.

The person	How the leader decides, communicates, delegates, gives feedback, and is experienced under pressure.
The partnership	How governance, incentives, informal power, trust, and peer relationships shape what is possible.
The practice	What the role must deliver for clients, talent, performance, growth, continuity, and strategy.

We help firms do three things

- **Clarify the transition** — role, mandate, stakeholders, success measures, and risks.
- **Build usable evidence** — confidential perspective, direct feedback, and assessment of readiness where appropriate.
- **Support the work in real time** — practical coaching and advisory support around live partner, client, governance, talent, and succession decisions.

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.

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, sector, or regional leader.
- A successor whose commercial credibility exceeds the available evidence of peer or enterprise leadership.
- A successful practice whose relationships, decisions, or leadership capability remain too concentrated.

We clarify what the role must deliver, what is at stake, where the principal risk sits, and what response is most useful—whether coaching, feedback, assessment, advisory support, leadership-team work, or a different intervention.

The work is developmental, not remedial. Purpose, confidentiality, and sponsor involvement are agreed at the outset.

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