



# Managers, Don't Forget Your Own Well-Being

Contributed by Andrew Elowitz, JD MBA PCC  
 elowitz@newactions.com | <http://newactions.com>

Studies have shown that the demands and stress of legal practice take a toll on many lawyers' mental and physical health (Krill, Johnson, & Albert 2016). For many lawyers the additional demands of being in a management position exacerbate those stresses. As other activities in this toolkit demonstrate, lawyers can build resilience and minimize the risk of burnout by developing healthy personal habits, good work-life integration, and competence in handling interpersonal conflicts.

But even managers who are genuinely concerned about the wellbeing of their firm members may overlook or underestimate the importance of looking out for their own physical and mental health. As a firm leader your wellbeing is important not only to you but to everyone else. If you're sidelined by physical or mental health problems, firm members who depend on you for guidance and leadership may suffer as well, not to mention the impact your problems may have on your clients.

In many respects, your health and wellbeing is more important than that of other firm members. As a manager and leader, you need to set an example for others by modeling behaviors that promote wellbeing. Credibility suffers and cynicism grows when leaders don't walk their talk and follow their own advice. How likely would you be to follow health advice from an obese doctor who smokes and drinks excessively?

At this point it should be rather obvious that whether you're a manager or not, you need to pay attention to your own wellbeing. But you may well be asking yourself, "How on earth am I going to do that with the increased time pressures of being a manager?" It's a great question and a real quandary. And though it may at first seem a bit counterintuitive, follow the advice of Dirty Harry Callahan from the classic movie *Magnum Force*—"know your limitations!"

Your limitation is simply that you are but one person. No matter how smart, talented, and energetic you may be—you are still one person with a finite amount of time in which to get everything done. Working harder and faster will only take you so far, and working longer hours may be an obstacle to your wellbeing. So what can you do to resolve this common leadership dilemma? By all means do the first activity listed below and then you will be ready to try one or more of the following ones.



## PRACTICES TO PROMOTE FIRM MANAGERS' WELL-BEING

**1. Don't Go It Alone!** Your first activity may be the least visible but it's the most important. Schedule an hour or two when you know you will have a minimum of interruptions or distractions. It can be time in or outside of your office as long as you can do a big-think and deep-think. You will ask yourself and hopefully answer four questions:



- What support do I need as the manager of my firm (or practice area head, or legal department head)?
- Who within the firm can provide me with that support?
- Who outside of the firm can provide me with support?
- How do I feel about asking for that support?

*Don't skip the last question!* If you're like a lot of lawyers, you may be hesitant to acknowledge you need support, let alone to ask for it. When compared to the general population, lawyers are far more autonomous and achievement oriented. These personality traits lead many to assume that they should, without additional training or support, be able to handle leadership and management responsibilities on their own. They worry that their peers and firm members will perceive a request for support as a sign of (gasp) weakness or (double gasp) incompetence. Nothing could be further from the truth. One of your top priorities as a manager are to set you and your firm up for success, so don't be shy in asking for support.

The following activities and practices will improve the odds of you being an effective firm leader and manager, while at the same time reducing your stress and enhancing your wellbeing.

**2. Mind Your Time.** Make sure you have time to manage and lead. Time is a finite resource and no matter how efficient you are management activities take time. Running even faster on the hamster wheel is a poor strategy for improving your wellbeing. Try these instead:

- *Delegate more.* Every day try to delegate at least three client or administrative matters that you usually would have handled yourself. For guidelines on how and what to delegate, please refer to Chapter 6 of *Lawyers as Managers* (Elowitz & Wasserman, 2017, pp. 79-104). Studies show that law firm partners that delegate not only

save time but also make more money (Hubbard, 2016).

- *Track your energy levels.* There are times of day and days of the week when we are our most focused and productive. When our energy levels are low, it takes us longer to get things done. If we can't add hours to the clock, at least we can use those hours more productively. By tracking your energy levels you will learn the best times for you to approach items that require the most analytical skill and concentration. You may also learn that caffeinating, though widely used, is not the best or only practice for boosting your energy levels. Paying attention to your sleep, nutrition, exercise, and recreation are better and more sustainable strategies (Schwartz & McCarthy 2007).
- *Manage other's expectations of you.* Don't forget the importance of also managing the expectations of you firm, partners, and family as to how much time you can and will devote to management activities. These conversations can help prevent strife and stress down the road. Initiate discussions with your firm about adjustments to your billable hours targets, client development efforts, and compensation that reflect your added contributions as a manager.

**3. Clarify Your Authority.** Make sure your management authority is commensurate with your responsibilities. There are few things more frustrating than being given the responsibility to do something without also being given adequate resources and authority to accomplish it. Your authority will of course vary depending on the nature and significance of a decision. You can simplify your life and save time by sharing the following guidelines with other firm members to clarify the boundaries of your power (Elowitz & Wassermann, 2017, pp. 210-215):

### ✓ **Who is making the decision?**

- You, as the manager?
- You with input from one or more individuals?



- You with input from a group?
- By group consensus?
- ✓ **Once the “who” has been determined also pay attention to:**
  - Who will be giving input on the decision?
  - Whose approval (if any) is needed?
  - Who must be notified on the decision and when?
  - Who will be implementing the decision?
  - Have those responsible for implementing been given clear instructions, necessary resources, and performance criteria?



Once firm stakeholders are in agreement with you about these guidelines, time is saved and wasteful firm politics are minimized. Conversations are focused where they should be—on the merits of a decision rather than on personalities. Knowing the limits of your authority will help you determine whether your decision-making authority matches your management responsibilities. If it does, great! And if it doesn't, you can begin conversations to help bring them into congruence. Either way you will minimize your chances of feeling powerless and disengaged.

**4. Commit to a Shared Vision.** Make sure your firm has a clear vision, direction, and business plan. You may be wondering how doing this will enhance your wellbeing. Managing lawyers can be challenging and stressful. It has often been likened to herding cats (Richard, 2002, and Elowitz, 2018). It's much easier to lead and manage when everyone is on the same page about a firm's values, direction, and plans to get there. Getting agreement and alignment up front minimizes tensions and provides you with a game plan you can follow. When your “cats” all have the same goal, you will deal with fewer conflicts within your firm.

**5. Develop Your Support System.** Further develop your support system by reaching outside your firm. The burdens of management can feel heavy at times and it can be difficult to look to someone within your firm for support. The alternative is to look outside where there are abundant resources:

- Law practice management coaches and consultants can help you develop your skills and work through especially tough challenges.
- Managing partner roundtables are in-person or virtual groups of lawyers that meet on a regular basis to discuss management matters, share best practices, and offer mutual support.
- Bar associations offer CLE programs and webinars on a wide range of management topics. Attending them is a great way to benchmark your management skills, meet people with similar challenges, and discover the most useful law practice management blogs, websites, periodicals, and books.

Any of these three resources will help keep you from feeling lonely and isolated at the top of your firm. Several recent studies have shown that feelings of loneliness are especially prevalent among lawyers and that they threaten our physical health and wellbeing (Rubino, 2018).



## REFERENCES

Elowitz, A. (2018, May/June). Is Managing Lawyers Like Herding Cats? *Law Practice*, 44(3), 34-39.

Elowitz, A., & Wasserman, M. W. (2017). *Lawyers as managers: How to be a champion for your firm and employees*. Chicago, IL: American Bar Association, Law Practice Division.

Hubbard, T. N. (2016, November 12). Research: Delegating More Can Increase Your Earnings. Retrieved January 10, 2017, from <https://hbr.org/2016/08/research-delegating-more-can-increase-your-earnings>

Krill, P. R., Johnson, R., & Albert, L. (2016). The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys. *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, 10(1), 46-52.

Richard, L. (2002). Herding cats: The lawyer personality revealed. *Altman Weil Report to Legal Management*, 29(11), 1-12. Retrieved from <http://www.managingpartnerforum.org/tasks/sites/mpf/assets/image/MPF%20-%20WEBSITE%20-%20ARTICLE%20-%20Herding%20Cats%20-%20Richards1.pdf>

Rubino, K. (2018, April 03). New Survey Proves Lawyer Is The Loneliest Profession Of All. Retrieved from <https://abovethelaw.com/2018/04/new-survey-proves-lawyer-is-the-loneliest-profession-of-all/>

Schwartz, T., & McCarthy, C. (2007, October) Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time. *Harvard Business Review*. 85(10). 63-74.