

# A life in politics – the tricky art for law firm leaders of governing the ungovernable

Laura Empson reflects on the confidence trick required of successful law firm leaders

Leaders, by definition, must have followers. This statement is axiomatic. But among lawyers it is not nearly as simple as that. In firms filled with highly-educated, independent thinkers, who do not like being told what to do, finding people who think of themselves as followers is not easy. And finding people who are happy to put themselves forward as leaders can be even harder.

One 'rainmaker' in a global law firm responded to my questions during a research interview as follows:

*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.*

(Client relationship partner, law firm)

How can you lead someone who thinks like this? That is the question at the heart of my new book, *Leading Professionals: Power, Politics, and Prima Donnas*. It draws on 25 years of my research into elite professional organisations, including law firms, accountancy firms and consultancies, to reveal a complex picture of leadership, underpinned by hidden power dynamics, riven with politics and challenged by demanding professionals.

## WHERE POWER RESIDES

Power in organisations belongs to people who control access to key resources. In conventional capital-intensive organisations, the key resource is capital and a small group of people with formal authority decide how that capital is allocated. But in knowledge-intensive organisations, such as law firms, the key resources are valuable specialist expertise; major client relationships; and a strong reputation in the marketplace. Lawyers who possess these resources have enormous informal power, even if they have no formal authority or title.

Typically they do not use their power to control others; instead they use it to resist others' ability to control them. They delegate formal authority to a managing or senior partner to lead the organisation on their behalf. However, they can withdraw that authority at any time, either formally by deposing them (which happens surprisingly often), or informally by ignoring them (which happens all the time).

So in an environment in which authority is contingent and autonomy is extensive, how does leadership happen? Here it is useful to draw on an idea that has been the subject of growing interest



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among leadership scholars: 'plural' leadership. From a plural perspective, leadership is not necessarily something that an individual does or a quality that an individual possesses, but is a process of interactions among organisational members seeking to influence each other. As such, it is difficult to recognise compared with more conventional models of individual leadership.

One of the foundations of my research is the concept of the 'leadership constellation'. This expresses the informal power structure within a professional organisation that overlaps with and sits alongside the formal authority structure.

At the centre is the senior executive dyad: that is, two leaders, typically a managing and senior partner, or chair and chief executive. Around them sit selected senior professionals who lead major fee-earning areas and (in some firms) heads of business services, such as the chief operating officer

and chief financial officer. Finally, there are the key influencers, who may have no formal leadership role but have power derived from control of key resources such as major client relationships.

## THE LEADERSHIP CONSTELLATION

The individuals who comprise the leadership constellation do not form a leadership team in any explicit sense because the constellation as a whole has no overt identity within the organisation. Some people 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 as leaders by their colleagues. Similarly, individuals may be part of the leadership constellation without having a formal title. The concept expresses the hidden power dynamics of the firm, which are usually only visible to the people who are within it – or who run afoul of it.

**THE POLITICS**

These ambiguous and shifting power dynamics almost inevitably give rise to political behaviours. During my research I did not ask questions specifically about politics, but many interviewees raised the issue unprompted. They were always keen to explain to me that they themselves were not political and that those colleagues who were seen to be political tended to suffer as a result.

This is ironic because partnerships not only resemble political parties but tend to use overtly-political language: elections are held, requiring candidates to issue manifestos, give speeches at candidates' debates and to talk of their 'electorate', 'constituents', 'campaign managers' and 'mandates'. And even in firms which avoid formal leadership elections, the distinctive power dynamics mean that a degree of politics is inevitable. After all, a leader needs to build and sustain consensus among his or her colleagues, to make trade-offs between competing interest groups and offer incentives to individuals to lend their support for particular initiatives.

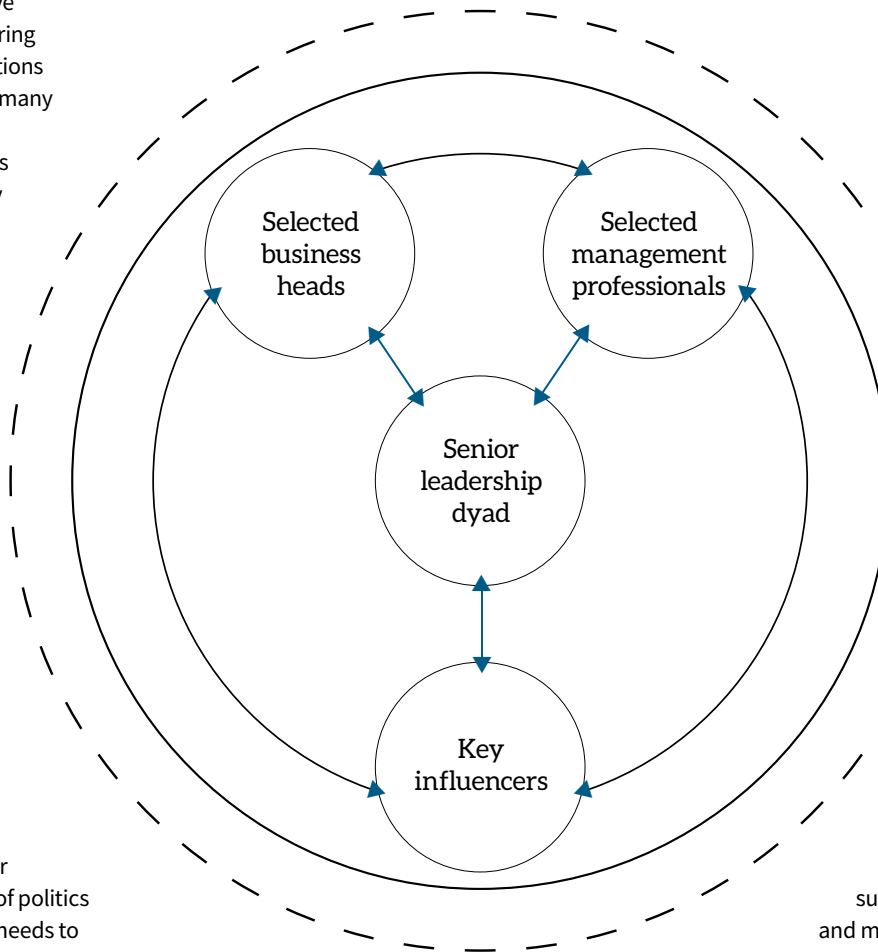
The best leaders of law firms are able to do this while persuading their colleagues and electorate that they are not pursuing their own interests but are genuinely motivated by the desire to improve the firm for others. As one lawyer described the senior partner at his firm: 'Sometimes my sense would be [our 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.'

A truly politically-skilled leader is able to conceal the extent of their political activity from the people they are seeking to lead. And perhaps this is why so many professionals are in denial about the prevalence of politics within their organisations.

**PRIMA DONNAS**

Not all professionals have the same level of political skill. This is someone at an accounting firm describing two fellow executive committee members: 'Bill – his approach to getting his own way was to hurl his toys out of his pram at a moment's

**THE LEADERSHIP CONSTELLATION**



notice. And Rudy – he's just like a sort of giant baby. Rudy and Bill, they'd both sit there in an exco in their nappies throwing rattles and toys around the place.'

Rather than rush to judgement, it is worth thinking more deeply about what may lie behind this prima donna behaviour. Previous research has identified two distinct personality types that often rise to leadership positions: narcissists and insecure overachievers. Superficially they may appear similar: both types are attracted by high-status occupations, are intensely ambitious, have a high need for recognition and will work tirelessly to achieve their goals.

A degree of narcissism is valuable to someone who hopes to rise to the top of an organisation. Constructive narcissists are outgoing, confident and function well under pressure. However, if they lack the self-mastery to deal with the negative feelings (such as envy and vindictiveness) that often accompany ambition, they

may become excessively demanding, egotistical, or aggressive.

The insecure overachiever, on the other hand, perpetually doubts what they know, yet is compulsively driven to succeed.

People at the peak of their career who are outstanding are also unbelievably insecure, unbelievably until you understand where they are coming from, which is: 'I've just won the biggest case in this country. Now what do I do?' (Partner, law firm)

The insecure overachiever is attracted by the high status and financial rewards that elite law firms offer. Moreover, the intensely competitive and insecure employment context prevalent in these firms fuels their sense of insecurity, and drives them to ever more intensive patterns of work. Such individuals are, therefore, particularly susceptible to overwork and burnout, and may become so exhausted and stressed that they lose their capacity to self-manage – and end up behaving like prima donnas.

Caught between narcissists and insecure overachievers, and perhaps struggling to manage their own innate tendencies towards either personality type, law firm leaders must present themselves as above the political fray, while all the time working tirelessly below the radar to strike deals, massage egos, decide when to intervene and when to stand back, and navigate the fluid power dynamics as they shift around the leadership constellation. No wonder leadership in law firms is so challenging.



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