

NEWS & INSIGHTS

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP: REFLECTIONS FROM MELODY EAGAN'S EIGHT YEARS AS MANAGING PARTNER

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After eight years — two full terms — as Lightfoot's managing partner, **Melody Eagan** is preparing to transition back into full-time practice. Her tenure in this role has been marked by intense challenges and change, both within Lightfoot and beyond. From guiding the firm through the COVID-19 pandemic to keeping pace with rapid innovation in the legal industry, Melody has been a steady presence. All of this required a leader who prioritized communication, transparency and empathy.

Of course, Melody did not assume the position knowing everything about leadership. Over the course of her tenure as managing partner, she has continually evolved as a leader, applying the lessons she learned and adapting to the demands of the role.

Below, we're joining Eagan for a deep dive into what she's learned about leadership over the past eight years.

Lesson One: Leading Through Communication and Transparency

From the moment she stepped into the managing partner role, Eagan knew she would prioritize clear, open communication. Over time, that principle became one of the defining characteristics of her leadership.

When communication is unclear or inconsistent, Melody learned, people begin to fill in the gaps themselves.

"I'm a big disciple of transparency, and making sure that you're clearly communicating things to everybody about what you're doing and why you're doing it," she said. "When things start getting done, and you haven't communicated what you're doing and why, it immediately leads to some level of nervousness and distrust."

That conviction guided her approach during one of the most uncertain periods in recent memory: the early months of the pandemic. While the firm worked remotely, Melody made it a priority to write to everyone every week. Those messages covered everything from how the firm was doing to how the leadership team was addressing the immense challenges of the moment.

The goal was simple: keep people informed, connected, and grounded when everything else felt unsettled.

"Every single week," she said, "I was sending an email to everybody in the organization, talking about where we were and how we were doing."

Out of that effort came something entirely new: the internal Lightfoot Good News Newsletter. Early on, when staff and lawyers were isolated at home, Melody encouraged everyone to send in photos—pets, kids, home offices, small joys—to create a sense of community. What began as a simple morale boost during lockdown became a monthly tradition that continues today.

"We started this idea during COVID when everybody was so apart and lonely," she said. "And we have continued that on since then. I love it, and I think others really love it."

The newsletter now includes family photos, milestones, birthdays, work anniversaries and short features on people across the firm. It has become a cultural touchstone and a way to stay connected.

Melody also prioritized transparency in more formal settings by first circulating summaries of executive committee meetings to partners. Previously, many partners felt out of the loop regarding what occurred in EC meetings, but

the summaries helped them feel more included in the firm's decision-making processes. In addition, she began holding "state of the firm" luncheons for staff and associates, during which she shared initiatives, updates and firm successes. These efforts collectively fostered greater openness and engagement throughout the organization.

Each of these practices—emails, luncheons, newsletters, summaries—arose from the same conviction: people want to understand what is happening in their workplace. Transparency fosters trust, calms uncertainty and builds connection. Melody's tenure shows how powerful consistent communication can be in shaping a law firm's culture.

Lesson Two: The Human Side of Leadership — Empathy, Listening and Influence

While transparency provided the structure for Melody's leadership, the human side of the role provided depth. Much of what she learned involved listening, empathy and the awareness that leaders are always influencing the people they lead, even when they don't intend to.

Early in her tenure, she discovered how important it was to listen before making final decisions.

"There have been many times where I thought we needed to do X," she said. "And then after some informed discussions, maybe it's not X, maybe it's a variation of X."

Being open to changing course and genuinely considering others' perspectives strengthened Melody's decisions and built trust.

Perhaps the most surprising leadership lesson for Melody was how differently people interpreted her words as managing partner. When colleagues came to her to vent, seek advice or talk through frustrations, she often felt she was responding as a friend. They, however, heard the voice of the firm's leader.

"They view you as the managing partner, and what you say takes on this extra resonance," she said. "That realization changed how I approached everyday conversations. Even casual comments could be taken as directives I didn't intend."

Staying grounded during difficult moments also became essential. On her desk, Melody keeps a note that reads: "Don't let a situation control me, but choose how I respond to the situation." It became a quiet mantra during moments that felt overwhelming, including major firmwide challenges. That reminder to choose her response helped Melody stay intentional and resilient.

Melody also came to realize that people differ in how they are shown they are valued, and that a leader must take that into account.

"The things that make me feel valued and appreciated may not be the things that make someone else feel valued and appreciated," she said. "Some people respond to praise. Others value time and attention. Others feel recognized through titles, bonuses or personal gestures."

Understanding and adapting to these differences became part of Melody's approach to supporting the firm's attorneys and staff.

Melody also firmly believes that leaders must act in line with what they ask of others.

"You set the tone of the organization," she said. "You've got to think through your words so carefully, and make sure that you're doing what you expect others to do."

A final lesson that stands out is the importance of mentorship for leaders. Melody relied on several seasoned partners throughout her tenure. These were people who offered guidance, perspective and a place to decompress.

"You've got to have that person you can lean on," she said. "I didn't recognize the importance of that when I took this job."

As she returns to practice, Melody plans to pay that forward.

Lesson Three: Strengthening the Firm Through Delegation, Strategy and Innovation

The third major theme of Melody's tenure centers on structure: how the firm worked, how decisions were made and how responsibilities were shared.

One of her biggest lessons was learning to let go. Melody describes herself as naturally a micromanager and a leader who wants to be involved in everything.

"You just can't do it all," she said. "Delegating work, giving others ownership and trusting them to handle issues became essential."

Perhaps the most significant internal change during Melody's tenure was the development of a strong C-suite of nonlawyer leaders. When Melody began her term in 2018, the firm had a combined COO/CTO role and a brand-new CFO. Many day-to-day operational responsibilities landed on her shoulders.

Over time, however, the firm expanded the C-suite and created an executive director role that centralized leadership of business functions, along with a standalone CTO position. This shift eased the managing partner's operational load and allowed Melody to focus more fully on strategic issues and supporting her fellow lawyers. The firm has since added a chief technology officer, who is spearheading efforts to maintain Lightfoot's leadership in innovation, while also safeguarding key IT systems and sensitive data.

"We are a much better business now," she said. "We have a C-suite of very qualified people who are helping lead the business side."

This structure helped the firm operate more intentionally and strategically, particularly in areas such as technology, marketing, business development and client engagement. Under her leadership, the firm launched a formal client feedback program and the well-received Client Roundtable, and it became more deliberate about providing value outside the billable hour.

Looking ahead, Melody is optimistic about the firm's future. She points to Lightfoot's "solid group of incredibly talented young partners and associates" and believes the firm is ready for what comes next, thanks to its innovative use of technology and strengthened business structure.

"I feel like we are really well-positioned for a bright and successful future," she said.

As for herself, Melody feels energized by the chance to return to full-time practice.

"I'm excited that I get to be a lawyer again," she said.

And while Melody describes the managing partner role as "extremely rewarding" and something she will miss, she is ready for her next chapter.