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Lessons in leadership from the front line

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Leadership lessons for lawyers emphasise confronting challenges, but few have faced the trials Dmytro Aleshko has encountered since February 2022.

Dmytro heads the Ukrainian law firm [Legal Alliance](#) and has managed to withstand the turmoil of the Russian invasion, with the threat to life and home, while supporting and caring for staff, clients and community over the last year.

The firm, specialising in life sciences law and based in Kyiv, has an international reputation with rankings in listings such as the Legal 500 EMEA. They work in areas including intellectual property, competition, corporate & commercial, dispute resolution, tax, employment and criminal law.

Known for their work in pharmaceutical regulation they initiated the founding of the pharmaceutical law committee of the Ukrainian Bar Association, and act in an advisory role to the Ministry of Health of Ukraine.

When the full-scale Russian offensive first broke, Dmytro drove his wife and young children to the border of Kyiv. They continued to Warsaw, where they have remained ever since, while Dmytro drove back to Kyiv, where he spoke with staff, offering them his support,


"The firm diversified activities but

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“By lunchtime on the first day there were explosions across Kyiv, with one rocket exploding close to the office,” said Dmytro. As a result, 70 per cent of the staff left Kyiv and the country in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Half of the staff were women, many of whom wanted to take children to safety, while five of the men, including two of the partners, were called up or decided to volunteer to fight for their country.

The firm froze all work and allowed all staff to choose whether to work, paying part-salary to those who were unable to do so, whatever the reason. Dmytro promised that the firm would continue to operate, committing to staying in Kyiv himself. He has stayed by that promise ever since and the team know that he will be at his desk every morning, however many hours of shelling or drone attacks have taken place overnight.

The disruption to working life has been significant; when there is an alarm or a ballistic rocket attack, everyone heads to the basement. Electrical power and internet access is often knocked out by missile strikes and the firm has had to install a diesel generator to provide back-up electricity and a Starlink satellite for internet access.

The freeze on new work was lifted once it became obvious that Russia was not going to succeed in occupying Kyiv in Spring 2022. Some of the firm’s clients started calling, both Ukrainian and international, to ask if the firm was ready to resume work.

By late summer, nearly all staff were back working, the shelling had significantly decreased, restaurants were open and money was coming in from clients. At this point, the partners decided to raise salaries for everyone by 30 per cent, creating a surge of positive motivation to take the firm forward.

By the end of autumn, the firm returned to pre-war revenue figures in Ukrainian hryvnia by adopting a strategy focused on smaller tasks rather than complex projects.

“We decided to propose legal services to clients that allowed us to concentrate on small, segmented tasks, and it was the best decision for the time. It allowed us to survive and even to raise our revenues in spite of the world,” said Dmytro.

Client work ranged from labour law for employees abroad through to establishing documentary evidence for clients who suffered destruction because of shelling,

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unavoidably remained an active sphere of law during the war.

It has also been active in community work. The partners committed to supporting the families of staff fighting on the front line from the outset; they also provide medical devices and medicines to the front line and support the families of those who have been killed. They have given pro bono guidance to the Ministry of Health on legal issues arising from the war.

While the situation in Kyiv is once again disrupted by regular drone and rocket attacks, the firm continues to secure new work and is now undertaking larger, complex projects.

As part of that shift, the whole team is once again working face-to-face at the firm's offices at least three days each week. Dmytro added: "We didn't expect it previously, but now we want to bring everyone together. This way we can build a stronger environment to support everyone, build the team and deliver on client work.

"I'm confident that new ideas, new projects and new activities happen when people communicate: we need our partners to communicate, we need our lawyers to communicate and this is the way for development."

In this spirit, Dmytro and his partners have also turned their attention to the longer term and are building new relationships outside Ukraine in readiness for the end of the war.

Currently, the country is working towards harmonising with European legislation in preparation for its potential accession to the EU. It also continues to tackle corruption, following the ousting of former President Yanukovich after mass street protests erupted in November 2013 when he announced that he would not proceed with the long-anticipated association with the EU.

"We want to create a basis for successful future co-operation with colleagues across Europe and beyond," Dmytro said. "And with those interested in investing in Ukraine. The situation will change a lot when the war ends, but for now we just have a message to everyone: remember in the days to come, Ukraine will be a new successful region in Europe, especially when we become a member of the European Union."

It speaks to the power of collective support and collaborative connections that the firm decided to join an international legal network during a full-scale military

by an independent disciplinary tribunal



SJ INTERVIEW

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SJ Interview: Hannah Ambrose

Hannah Ambrose is an international arbitration partner at Herbert Smith Freehills. She talks to Solicitors Journal about her practice and the Law Commission's recent proposals to update the Arbitration Act 1996.



FOREWORD Fri Sep 08 2023

Whose human rights are more important, yours or mine?

Under the law, should your right to express your opinion – be it on politics, the environment, abortion, or anything else – trump my right to go about my business unhindered, whether or not I happen to agree with your opinion?

They have joined the [Eurojuris International](#) network which enables them to connect with other law firm members around the world to make individual connections, share legal updates and experiences in their specific area of law, both virtually and at regular face to face events. In the UK, [LawNet](#) is the national organisation for Eurojuris, and together with other national associations across Europe and individual members around the world they together form a 6,000-strong worldwide network.

Now, Dmytro is hoping to attend the network's international annual congress in Rome this autumn to speak directly with his Eurojuris colleagues. During this period of martial law in Ukraine, men aged 18 to 60 are not allowed to leave Ukraine, as they must be available to fight in case of mobilisation, and requests to leave the country must be approved.

The fact that the law firm has not only functioned but also grown in these challenging circumstances speaks to a remarkable resilience. Dmytro points to good decision making by the partners, but his experience in squaring up to challenges over the past three decades must have played a significant part in engendering the calm pragmatism and strength with which he has led the firm through the past 18 months.

As he explained: "I'm one of the founders and have been working for Legal Alliance for 28 years. So, I have survived three financial crises together with two revolutions and the Covid pandemic. And now I'm surviving this.

"Life is unpredictable, we do not know what will happen tomorrow. But to work in such conditions we see that we become stronger and we will have some advantage in future, in a peaceful time when the war ends."

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