

Report to Legal Management

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Need Partners Who Can Effectively Manage Your Firm? Start by Training Your Associates



Marci M. Krufka

By Marci M. Krufka

As I work with partners in law firms throughout the country, I continue to be surprised at how little, if any, formal training they have had in the business of law – leadership, management, profitability, and business development. I recall with horror lengthy discussions among partners as to why billable hours should be the only consideration in setting partner compensation. Or, I look at my imaginary bank overflowing with imaginary nickels – one for each time a law firm partner told me that all a lawyer had to do to market him or herself was to “do a good job for the client.”

Lawyers are largely bright and talented people. Most, however, do not have MBAs, did not study business in college and do not devote sufficient non-billable time each year to ongoing leadership and management training courses.

Law firms are investing more than ever in professional development. Across the country, hundreds of firms have hired full-time professional development administrators to manage firm-wide lawyer training and development. Firms have spent many thousands of dollars developing formal, in-house training programs for lawyers.

At last, some firms are looking beyond substantive training courses and training their lawyers in the business of law. In recent years, firms have invested in leadership and management training for partners involved in

firm management, including practice group leaders. Firms are finally beginning to recognize the importance of business training for all lawyers.

Law Schools Do Not Focus on the Business of Law

We did not learn about the business of law in law school. Most law schools do not include law firm management courses in their curricula. Those that do, offer them as elective, rather than required courses. Because there is a much greater chance that there will be a constitutional law question on the bar examination than one on law firm organizational structure, many students ignore the law firm management courses that do exist.

Some law schools have legal business-related courses. The University of Pennsylvania Law School, for example, plans to offer a course on the large law firm in the 2004-05 academic year. The course will help students understand

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the unique characteristics of large law firm practice, including management issues.

William and Mary's Marshall-Wythe School of Law is one of a few that offers a course in law office management. The course covers several areas of law firm management including human resource issues, systems (including time and billing, document retention and litigation management), and financial management. Richard Herrmann, a partner at Blank Rome's Wilmington, Delaware office, teaches the course with Darlene Bradberry of Breeden, Salb, Beasley & DuVall, PLC in Norfolk, Virginia. Mr. Herrmann describes the level of interest in the course as "moderate."

Law office management courses are often perceived to be geared more toward lawyers who intend to hang out their own shingle, rather than to large firm lawyers. So, lawyers with big firm ambitions often overlook them. "We tend to have a high population of students [in the class] who see themselves in a small office or solo environment somewhere down the road," Ms. Bradberry said.

Some Firms "Get It"

When lawyers begin to work in law firms, there is still much to learn substantively. Even sophisticated in-house training programs focus most, if not all, of their efforts on substantive and procedural legal issues. There are some firms, however, that have embraced the concept that management training is crucial to the ultimate success of the firm and its lawyers, and these are discussed below.

King & Spalding – Senior Associate Academy and More

King & Spalding, a national law firm with over 700 lawyers, has made business training a priority. The firm has incorporated several important aspects of business training into its associate programs. There are two pri-

mary areas of focus for the training: leadership and management, and law firm economics. One example of the leadership and management training is the firm's Senior Associate Academy, a two-day program that teaches the associates skills in delegation of work and giving and receiving performance feedback. The program also helps participants gain an awareness of their management styles through voluntary, confidential personality assessments.

"We strongly recommend that a business curriculum be part of all law firm professional development programs."

The firm is also working to ensure that associates have a good handle on the basics of law firm economics. In addition to firm management's periodic briefings to associates, new programs are being rolled out at the practice group level. The goal is for each associate to have an understanding of key financial indicators and the factors for profitability for the firm and his or her practice group, so that each associate better understands how he or she can contribute to the firm's success.

Lisa Keyes, Director of Professional Development and partner at King & Spalding, recognizes the value in the firm's business training programs. She said, "Years ago, the firm was smaller and most lawyers were able to learn what they needed to know about management and marketing directly from their mentors. Our firm's management recognizes that the firm is now so large and so complex that this is no longer the case, and formal programs are a useful supplement to one-on-one mentoring." She considers her firm's programs a success, and will continue to evaluate how they affect future behavior.

King & Spalding does not stop with associates. The firm has also made a significant investment in leadership and management training for partners, particularly senior managers and practice group leaders.

Pillsbury Winthrop – An Increased Focus on Business Training

Valerie Fitch, an attorney and the Director of Attorney Development at Pillsbury Winthrop, says that management and business development training has been a growing focus in the firm's extensive lawyer development program. Coordinating these programs is no small task – the firm has over 750 lawyers in 16 offices worldwide. Nonetheless, the firm has undertaken several programs in recent years, largely at the request of the associates themselves. The management training initiative was one of the many initiatives that arose from the firm's attorney development committee – a diverse group comprised of partners and associates from the firm's different offices.

The firm has an extensive business development training curriculum for all lawyers in the firm, from junior associates to partners. This program ranges from client development seminars to one-on-one coaching for partners. The firm has even hired a full-time director of client development training, Jim Cranston, who develops and implements this training for the firm. Ms. Fitch said that the seminars are a great way to reach a large number of lawyers at one time, and the one-on-one coaching has had a significant impact on individual lawyer progress.

Pillsbury Winthrop also implemented a firm-wide program called, "Feedback and Review Skills for Better Results." As with most lawyer training programs, Ms. Fitch said that the biggest challenge was delivering a consistent message within all of the firm's offices. To accomplish that, Pillsbury Winthrop partnered with an outside consultant who deliv-

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ered the training module to each office. The program includes a combination of live training and videotaped scripted scenarios in which Pillsbury Winthrop lawyers and legal assistants acted out situations demonstrating feedback and reviews given well and given badly.

The firm has at least two additional management training programs under development, including a program on transaction and case management skills. Ms. Fitch said that the level of interest for this type of training is very high. Pillsbury Winthrop is a leader in business training programs, due to the efforts of Valerie Fitch and Jim Cranston and the commitment of the firm's Chair, Mary Cranston, and its Managing Partner, Marina Park. Ms. Fitch believes that the level of interest for business training in other firms is growing as well, and more and more, firms are incorporating business training into their professional development programs.

Business Training Recommendations

We strongly recommend that a business curriculum be part of all law firm professional development programs. We see the benefits of this training in the successes of law firm management, practice leadership, and individual lawyers.

Our advocacy of leadership and management programs is not unique. The Association of Legal Administrators, for example, has a recommended curriculum for developing lawyer business skills. "A Business Skills Curriculum for Law Firm Associates," was designed and written by Stephen R. Chitwood, Ph.D., J.D., Anita F. Gottlieb, M.B.A., D.P.A. and Evelyn Gaye Mara, M.A. and developed by the Center for Law Practice Strategy and Management at the The George Washington University. The curriculum was based upon 58 skills identified by law firm partners, associates and executive directors in a

study done by the Center in 1999. The study included in-person interviews as well as an extensive nationwide survey of 265 partners, associates and executive directors representing 69 firms of large, medium and small size. The study and the curriculum are the most comprehensive to date on this topic.

The curriculum contains specific recommendations for the skill sets that need to be developed in lawyers. The general categories of skill development identified in the curriculum include: general business skills, understanding the firm's operations and procedures (including firm economics), client relations and client development skills, managing one's own work, management and supervising others' work and being an effective member of the team.

Dr. Chitwood, co-author of the publication and an adjunct consultant with Altman Weil, says that one of the most valuable aspects of the curriculum is information pertaining to the recommended timing for such training. "It is critically important for firms to understand which skills associates need, at what level of competency and at what time within their careers." The curriculum, therefore, details the skills associates should develop by the end of their first, third, fifth and seventh years of practice. Dr. Chitwood also noted that the curriculum specifies individual learning objectives and recommended instructional materials for each skill cluster and detailed information on how to utilize internal and external resources to implement a business training program.

What should your firm do to develop your lawyers' leadership and management skills?

- Incorporate training in the business of law in your professional development programs.
- Gain buy-in, if not advocacy, from firm leaders to incorporate leader-

ship and management training in your firm's curriculum.

- Ensure that, at a minimum, your lawyers have a solid understanding of management trends in the profession (i.e. what are lawyers and law firms doing to be more successful?), the fundamentals of law firm economics and profitability, and business development skills, including really understanding what their clients want and how to improve their relationships with clients and potential clients.
- Insist that any outside providers of management training completely understand lawyers, law firms and the legal market. As Valerie Fitch put it, "Once the lawyers hear the word 'customer' instead of 'client' from an outside trainer, you've already lost them."
- Create a culture where excellence in leadership and management is valued.
- Include leadership and management skills as part of your lawyer performance evaluations.
- Tie rewards in the firm's compensation program to excellence in leadership and management.

Law firms that have invested in management training for their lawyers are reaping the rewards. If you want the future owners of your law firm to be sophisticated and successful leaders, managers and experts in the business of law, include leadership and management training in your professional development programs and start training all of your lawyers now. ♦

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