DEVELOPING PARTNERS: AN END TO SINK OR SWIM

Steve Armstrong and Tim Leishman

> *Our current system facilitates "natural selection" [among partners]… but there are other lawyers who would be successful with more attention at an earlier stage.*
>
> A senior partner

> *The firm's lack of a formalized system for cultivating business development and leadership skills makes it challenging for anyone to develop those skills. … [A]s I move into new stages in my career, I find myself adrift in trying to continue developing those skills.*
>
> A successful mid-career partner

For decades, law firms have agonized about their associates. They have invested heavily in recruiting and training, worried about morale and attrition, and paid almost as much attention to associate satisfaction surveys as they have to profitability rankings. More recently, as other chapters in this book describe, many are rethinking the conventional models for promoting and compensating associates.

Now turn your eyes away from associates, and look instead at partners. The contrast is striking. Long after "sink-or-swim" was officially discarded for associates, it still prevails for most partners in most firms. There are encouraging signs of change: in particular, more training and coaching programs, especially for new partners and, at the other end of the spectrum, for practice-group leaders. But very few firms, if any, pay as much attention to their partners' development as to their associates'.

This disparity is an odd phenomenon. When lawyers become partners, most are in their 30s and still have three-quarters of their careers ahead of them. These years are likely to be far more challenging than even the most competitive race to partnership, because succeeding as a partner requires a range of abilities beyond those an associate needs to become a partner. The list is intimidating:

- The business-development and client-relationship skills to succeed in a competitive marketplace
- The managerial and leadership skills to build teams to serve clients
- The project-management skills to budget effectively, run matters efficiently, and manage to a budget or fixed fee without destroying a matter's profit margin

- The collaborative skills to work with – and develop business with – partners in other practices and offices, including partners from different countries and legal cultures
- The business acumen to manage a practice's strategy and profitability

Moreover, the careers of many successful partners typically involve three difficult transitions *after* they become partners (see Sidebar #1). *[Note: Sidebars have been omitted from this excerpt.]* Once they have established self-sustaining practices (the first transition), ambitious partners find ways to "leverage" their practices, generating significant amounts of work for others (the second transition). Finally, some partners go on to contribute broadly to the success of the firm beyond their own practices (the third transition). Each transition involves a change in goals and, therefore, in the skills and behaviors that matter most to the partner's continuing development.

Firms often see partners struggling to make these transitions. When associates are thrown into the deep end of partnership, they have to take on roles for which life as an associate did not fully prepare them. (As one new partner said, "Overnight, I changed from being the world's best associate to being the world's worst partner.") At a later stage, some once-promising partners stall, working in small silos or treading water until they become too expensive to be kept afloat by partners who are generating work. Even if they do not "fail" at this stage, their careers may reach a plateau that they would like to move beyond, but cannot. Finally, at a still later stage, it is common to see senior partners who have the credibility and experience to take on leadership roles, but not the right set of behaviors and skills.

These facts lead to a conclusion that would seem novel only in law firms. In a marketplace that has become more competitive and less secure, a firm's investment in its partners' development will be even more important than its investment in its associates. The more it can do to help partners make the transitions described above, and to reduce the chances that careers will stall or collapse along the way, the more successful the firm will be.

For most law firms, however, taking their partners' development seriously will be a significant change, one that requires some new thinking. The methods firms have used to develop associates will not work for partners, because the goal is quite different. For associates, the primary goal is to develop the range of legal skills and expertise they need to function as "fully grown" lawyers, and no longer as apprentices. For partners, the primary goal is to expand their contributions to the success of the firm. The difference may seem to split hairs: after all, associates contribute to the firm's success, and partners continue to become even better lawyers. But *partners are evaluated for their contributions rather than their competencies*.

This difference is reinforced by another. Despite the "corporatization" of many large firms, partnership still implies not only a high degree of legal expertise, but also an unusually large measure of professional autonomy. This autonomy means that partners generally prefer to manage themselves, not be managed by others. However, partners should also share responsibility for the firm's overall success, rather than focusing only on their individual work and personal success. The result is a tension inherent in the concept of a partnership: partners are much freer than associates to define their own goals and manage their professional lives, but also more obliged to align their personal goals with the firm's.

As this chapter will discuss, these two differences have important implications for how a firm should approach its partners' development. The chapter first describes the "how" of professional development for partners: how can firms create an approach that works for partners, rather than mimicking the approach they are accustomed to taking for associates? It then turns to the "what": what are the skills and abilities – beyond technical legal skills – that are most important to partners' success? Finally, the chapter addresses three systemic issues that affect partners' development: compensation criteria; the willingness of partners (especially senior partners) to help other partners build their practices; and how the firm uses its partners' non-billable time. [1]

A final preliminary point: the development of individual partners is only one aspect of a talent-management strategy for partners. If a firm were to conduct a comprehensive audit of how it manages its partner-level talent, it would examine all the aspects listed in the box at the chapter's end, just as this book examines the full range of talent management for associates. These aspects are beyond this chapter's scope, but we would remiss not to acknowledge them.

A. An Approach to Partner Development: Principles and Methods

A strategy for developing associates is usually built around formal firm-wide processes (training, evaluations, mentoring, competency frameworks, etc.), with individualized attention providing a second tier of support. A strategy for partners should reverse that emphasis. If the question is how each partner can expand his or her contributions to the firm, the answer will probably be quite specific to the individual. In addition, that expansion depends not only on skills and abilities but also on motivation and desire, qualities much more likely to be encouraged by individual attention than by even the best-designed formal process or program.

Ideally, therefore, most professional development for partners should take place person by person and person to person, and the key "process" will be conversations. The formal systems and programs – compensation processes, planning processes, training programs, upward or 360-degree reviews, etc. – are important. However, before a firm adds a new one, it should be judged rigorously by whether it will actually enhance partners' desire and ability to contribute as much as possible to the firm.

1. The Principles of Partner Development

[1] Much of this chapter is informed by a Partner Development Survey conducted in 2009. Partners from 44 firms participated; all had been selected by their firms as among their more successful partners. The 507 who completed the survey represented 89% of those invited to do so. The survey was conducted by the chapter's authors and by David Cruickshank of Kerma Partners.

When a firm sets out to design its approach to partner development, it should begin by asking how it can take advantage of the traits most partners share. Even more so than most lawyers, partners:

- Like to achieve
- Take pride in their skills and talents
- Like to analyze and solve problems
- Want to manage themselves, not be managed by others.

What are the implications for a firm's partner-development strategy? It should be "goal-driven," "strength-based," and "situation-specific." [2]

Goal-Driven. The most important form of "development" may be simply helping partners to define goals that are realistic enough to seem achievable and attractive enough to be motivational, and then helping them move towards those goals. This help can benefit new partners in particular. They may feel adrift when the goal of making partner suddenly disappears. They may also be caught in difficult situations: for example, a partner on whom they have relied stops feeding them work or, conversely, assumes that they will continue to do nothing but support the partner's practice. But mid-career and senior partners can also benefit from defining a new goal, one that re-energizes them, overcomes the inertia or comfort that has stalled their progress, or demonstrates that the firm sees a promising future for them. A representative comment from a senior partner who responded to the Partner Development Survey:

> *[My firm's model seems] more contingent on rewarding good behavior/results than on mapping a plan, mentoring toward a goal, and measuring success. … [T]he firm does not appear to have – or at least hasn't ever communicated to me – a vision of my professional horizon.*

At the heart of a partner-development program, therefore, should be an effective process for helping partners define and act on goals for developing their practices and careers. As we discuss below, that process should be imbedded not only in a firm's formal planning processes, but also in its training programs for partners and the ways in which senior partners mentor junior ones.

What makes a goal-setting process effective? In summary, the goals should be:

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[2] These principles emerge from the principles that apply to adult learning in general, a broad topic that is an especially important context for partner-level development. A classic text on this topic is Knowles, M. S. (1970, 1980) *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Cambridge. For a related discussion of the conditions under which partners are most likely to learn, see the "Why Coaching?" section of Chapter [ ], "Coaching and Career Development."

- firmly rooted in partners' individual circumstances and their professional and personal strengths,
- professionally and personally attractive to them,
- developed through conversations with other partners who can help them achieve their goals, and
- attached to a structured "action plan" that is discussed periodically with someone else (for example, a group leader or other senior partner, or an external coach).

Judged by these criteria, many firms' formal planning or goal-setting processes for partners do not meet even the loosest definition of "effective." A revenue or hours target, for example, may be a necessary objective, but it is not a true goal because it is imposed on a partner's practice rather than emerging organically from it. Similarly, if a partner writes his or her goals at 10 p.m. one night, discusses them as part of a compensation review, and then puts them in a drawer, the process may still be better than nothing – but barely.

Strength-Based. Coaching, mentoring and training are most effective when they are based on partners' individual strengths, both professional and personal: Is a partner particularly good at developing relationships? At dazzling clients with brilliant problem-solving skills? At providing impeccably efficient and responsive service? Focusing on strengths has two advantages. Partners' careers are more likely to flourish if they make focused, energetic use of their strengths than if they move from a C to a B in their weaker areas. In addition, if a plan builds on what partners know they do well, they are much more likely to follow through with it.

Focusing on strengths does not mean ignoring weaknesses. If a weakness will retard someone's career or harm other people, it needs to be addressed, of course. However, if a firm spends more time dealing with partners' weaknesses than helping them build on their strengths, it should step back and re-think its approach. That change may require a new mindset among practice and office leaders, who are typically accustomed to focusing on the problem partners and the stars but spending little time on the rest.

As with goal-setting, a strength-based approach can apply to all segments of a partner-development strategy. In the course of coaching and mentoring, focusing on an individual's strengths is relatively easy. (A caveat: partners are usually no better than anyone else at taking an objective view of their strengths and weaknesses. They usually need some help, through formal assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or 360-degree reviews and through informal advice from coaches or other partners.) In training programs, applying a strength-based approach is more difficult, but not impossible. For example, the program can discuss a range of methods and styles, describe several different paths to success, and show how different strengths can each be developed into a full-fledged set of skills that will help a partner move down the path he or she has chosen. This approach works for programs on very different topics: business development, for example, or leadership, or managing associates, or building a professional network.[3]

Situation-specific. This principle takes two forms.

First, any aspect of a partner-development program – a planning process, a mentoring conversation, or a training program – is unlikely to have much effect unless it speaks to a need the partner has already perceived, one that arises from his or her individual experience and situation. This is why, for example, many programs on feedback, a perennial topic for partner-level training programs, do so little good: the participants may grasp intellectually that they should improve for the firm's benefit, but nothing in their own experience leads them to believe that the improvement will make a difference to their practices or careers, and the program fails to make that connection for them.

Second, any attempt to improve a skill or inculcate a new behavior has to rely primarily on what happens "on the job," not in a training program. This fact leads to an obvious question: how can you increase the odds that, when partners are immersed in their work, they will actually have the focus and energy to apply a new skill? There are two primary methods, neither fool-proof but both better than wishful thinking. Both assume that the partner wants to improve; without that motivation, neither will work.

- Combine an action plan with coaching. If a partner sets new goals, each goal should be attached to a series of concrete actions that lead toward it, preferably with a timetable attached. Except for the most self-disciplined people, however, even the best-designed plan needs to be reinforced by coaching, preferably for long enough to give the new skills or habits time to take root. In this context, the coaching is likely to be a combination of coaching in the sports sense (that is, advice about how to perform a specific skill) and coaching in the executive coaching sense (see Chapter [ ], "Coaching and Career Development").

- Persuade a partner to develop the habit of "conscious practice." If the partner's goal is a stretch because it requires new skills, then it cannot be accomplished unless some learning takes place along the way. "Conscious practice" is designed to raise the odds that a partner will actually focus on and improve the skills he or she cares about. The habit takes this form: Pick a specific skill or behavior (perhaps two, but no more). Look ahead a few days or a few weeks, and identify situations that will offer the chance to use that skill or behavior. After the few days or weeks have passed, step back and reflect on how you did, and what you could do even better. Then repeat.

[3] For an example of this approach to business development, see Tim Leishman, "Sustaining Practice Styles" (*Law Governance Review*, Summer 1998; available at www.firmleader.com).

2. The Methods of Partner Development

Many firms now have mature associate-development programs that can serve as models for other firms. In the realm of partner development, we are not so fortunate. However, there has been enough experience so that we can draw some preliminary conclusions about the methods that work best, and this section will describe the most important of them. It should be read together with Section C, which discusses systemic and cultural factors that can speed or slow partners' development. In some firms, addressing these issues may be more important than applying the methods described below.

a. Individual goal-setting and planning

More firms, especially larger ones, are asking their partners to write individual plans, usually annually. In the Partner Development Survey, 62% of the respondents said they had written such a plan for 2009. These planning processes are bound to do some good, because almost any process that asks professionals to focus on their goals will do some good. But many of the annual processes are, ultimately, not a great success. The problems are familiar:

- The planning process is often part of the compensation process. As a result, the goals are crafted to support a claim to higher compensation, not because they excite enthusiasm in the partner writing them.
- The goals are often written at the last minute, and without consulting other partners who could help shape them and then support them.
- The goals are not accompanied by a thoughtful, realistic plan for implementing them.
- There is little follow-up.

The cure for these problems is not to create more elaborate annual planning processes for every partner. As this chapter suggested earlier, too much "management" is, for most partners, de-motivating. What would an effective planning process look like? Here are some recommendations:

First, do not assume a formal process must take place for every partner every year. Especially beyond a lawyer's first years as a partner, every three years may be often enough. Partners do not need to be constantly shepherded forward.

Second, begin the process not with a form, but with a conversation – typically, between the partner and a group or firm leader. Then make sure the partner talks with other partners, not only to ask advice but also to widen the circle of those whose participation in the partner's plan will be important to its success. Although setting a goal can be (and, in a law firm, often is) an individual activity, reaching the goal almost always requires collaborating with others, and that collaboration flows more easily if the collaborators were first involved in crafting the goals.

Third, give partners a form – a simple form – that is truly helpful for setting goals. Such a form usually asks them to take stock of where they are, contemplate personal as well as professional goals, and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Then, once they have settled on a manageable number of realistic goals (perhaps two, perhaps three), the form walks them through decisions about the specific steps they will take towards their goals, an analysis of the obstacles they will face, and a survey of the supporters they should line up.

Fourth, ensure follow-up. It is here that the plans created by even the best-intentioned partners often fall apart. For most over-worked professionals, especially when their plans require steps that do not come easily, the discipline of having to speak with a mentor or coach periodically can make all the difference. If the partner is willing to accept an external coach, that person may provide the most effective follow-up: he or she will keep on schedule, will have no qualms about asking blunt questions, and can lend a secure, confidential ear for problems the partner is loathe to raise with other partners.

Creating this kind of planning process, with its emphasis on conversations and follow-up, for every partner every year would be impossible, even if it were advisable. But creating it for, say, a third or a quarter of them each year should be entirely possible.

b. Training programs

The role of formal training rests on two facts. First, as this chapter has emphasized, the goal is not to train all partners to master a set of "partner competencies," but to focus on individual goals in the context of individual careers. Second, like most adults but even more so, most partners dislike being "trained."

Put together, these facts suggest that, before a firm organizes a new training program for partners, the proposal should be put to the following test: will it change the behavior of a significant number of partners in ways that will benefit their careers? This question is much tougher than the question of whether the program teaches a generic partner competency, but it is not cause for despair. In the Partner Development Survey, of the 43% of partners who had received formal training in developing business or in managing and leading, 60% said the program had a significant influence. That figure is proof that a well-designed program on a well-chosen topic, aimed at the appropriate audience, can be effective even in the face of partners' congenital skepticism about training.

When is training for partners most likely to be effective? The answer involves both a program's audience and its design.

Audience.

Like all other approaches to partner development, training should be linked to individual partners' own goals. The corollary: training will work best if is for an audience that shares related goals. Where will a firm find that audience? Most likely at a transition through which many or all partners will pass. At that threshold, the partners share at least a common sense of where they are heading, even if their individual objectives vary. Three transitions offer the most promising opportunities for training that will speak to enough people to justify a formal program. (These transitions match the stages described in Sidebar #1. *[Note: Sidebars have been omitted from this excerpt.]*)

- New partners. New income partners are especially amenable to a formal training program, because they all share the goal of becoming an equity partner. But these transitional programs can also be effective in one-tier partnerships.

- Partners who keep themselves and a couple of associates busy, but now need to build a larger practice that will support more people.

- New or prospective group and office leaders, or leaders in a firm that is re-defining its expectations of their roles.

Design.

We take it for granted that anyone designing training for partners will apply all the familiar principles of adult learning. Here, we focus only on some of their implications for partner-level training programs, and in particular for the two most common types of training.

<u>*Programs that help participants set goals and move towards them.*</u>

Although many training programs teach a skill or expertise and then ask participants to apply it, these programs turn that approach inside out. Their over-arching context is a structured process for having the participants take stock of their current situation, craft goals, and then take the specific actions that will move them towards their goals.   This process extends both before and after the workshops that would be the main event in a conventional training program.

- Before the program, the participants are given questionnaires – the simpler the better – that ask them to reflect on the current state of their practice (for example, where does their work come from? how satisfied are they with their mix of clients?), the extent of their professional network, and where they would like to take their practice and their careers in the next three to five years.

- During the program, they further define their goals and next steps – and discuss the goals with others. That discussion is important for two reasons: the goals will take on more solidity if they are shared with others, and this sharing is itself one way to expand a partner's support network.

- After the program, a follow-up process continues for several months. It is designed to provide a structure and discipline that will increase the odds that the participants will actually take the steps they plan to take. This follow-up can have several forms: periodic conversations with an external coach, for example, or with a practice-group leader or another senior partner, or periodic gatherings of the participants to report about their progress and the challenges they are encountering.

A program of this kind will usually include training in some specific skills, but often with a different twist. The training will be designed not to impart a generic skill, but to help participants recognize the range of skills and behaviors that different lawyers bring to bear when, for example, they develop business, and then to focus each participant on the specific behaviors that fit his or her goals and personality.

Skills programs.

Are there occasions when, despite this chapter's qualms about training all partners across a generic set of competencies, a classic skills-based workshop, standing on its own, makes sense?   These occasions arise primarily in two situations:

- when a group of partners recognizes that they need a new skill to deal with a change in their practice, and
- when a firm decides that a skill is an important enough so that, even though many partners would just as soon not be bothered, they all need to take the skill more seriously.

The first situation arose, for example, when litigators had to deal with the complex managerial issues posed by e-discovery. More recently, it also arose when the emphasis on alternative fee arrangements pushed lawyers to become better project managers. The second situation has arisen most commonly in regard to feedback and supervision, a skill that firms rightly take to be critical to associates' morale and development. It has also arisen in regard to leadership, a skill that most large firms need more senior partners to develop.

In a skills workshop, the key design question is how to increase the odds that the participants will actually apply what they learn to change their behavior after the program ends. The best answer: structure the program so that, instead of implicitly asking the participants to transform their behavior, it asks each to choose two or three specific new habits that will be relatively easy to adopt, and then to practice them – perhaps one at a time – over several weeks or months. As we noted earlier, this kind of focused practice is how anyone is most likely to improve at any complex skill. In addition, this approach reflects what we have learned through interviews with scores of partners who are especially good managers or business developers. Typically, they have succeeded at imbedding in their daily or weekly routine a few specific, small-scale habits that enable them to turn their good intentions into consistent behaviors.

c. Coaching

Unfortunately, most law firms that provide coaching to partners have used it to cure a few partners of behaviors that have become too egregious to ignore. This approach has given coaching a bad name in many firms, and made partners even warier of accepting it. However, as the previous section said, coaching can be a powerful tool for helping overworked lawyers to stay on track towards their goals. The coach may have good advice to offer, but it is the discipline that matters most. As one partner said:

> *I do not think there is a substitute for having someone hold you accountable for identifying goals and then taking steps towards achieving them. That accountability and discipline is crucial to building the good habits that then continue.*

This discipline could be provided by another partner in the firm, perhaps a practice leader. However, that internal support is often more useful for providing occasional advice than for keeping someone on track, because the practice leader is likely to be too busy and because both partners may feel awkward about a formal checking-in process. As we noted earlier, an external coach will feel no such awkwardness, and will also provide a confidential ear for discussing issues a partner may not care to discuss with other partners.

Partners are likely to be most receptive to an external coach if the coaching is connected to the kind of program described above, a program during which the participants commit to a goal and a plan. These coaching arrangements are becoming more common – although still not commonplace – in business-development programs and leadership programs. Among those responding to the Partner Development Survey, only 27% had worked with an external coach as part of a business-development or leadership program; of that group, however, three quarters said the coaching had had a significant effect.

For more about coaching, see Chapter [ ]. If a firm wants its senior partners to take on coaching roles, it should educate them about the principles that chapter discusses – and, in particular, about the difference between effective coaching and simply giving advice.

d. Upward reviews, 360-degree reviews, and self-assessments

For any skills that involve dealing with other people, self-awareness is critical. It has two components: an understanding of your own preferences as they emerge from personality and experience, and an understanding of how you are perceived by others. To create the first kind of understanding, firms have been turning to a variety of assessment instruments, of which the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is the best known and most often used. To create the second kind of understanding, firms typically rely on upward reviews of senior lawyers by junior lawyers. A few firms have employed more elaborate 360-degree reviews, in which a lawyer receives comments from a range of those with whom he or she works, including peers, superiors and, perhaps, clients. Because these reviews are time-consuming, they are most often used for a small group as part of a leadership or business-development training program. (In corporations, they are much more widely used.) While this chapter is not the place to go into detail about these tools, their importance is difficult to overstate. As they become more common in law firms, more partners are recognizing their value and, as a result, resistance to them is lessening.

B. The Content of Partner Development

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C. Systemic and Cultural Factors that Affect Partners' Development

Before a firm creates new programs, it should make sure that nothing about its existing processes or culture is blocking its partners' development. Among the partners responding to the Partner Development Survey, almost 40% reported that their firm's culture or systems in some way impede or discourage the achievement of their full potential. The percentage rose to 50% among those who have been partners for a few years and are now expanding their practices – a group that is critical to a firm's growth.

In their written responses, partners most often pointed to two issues: the effect of their firm's compensation criteria, and the willingness of senior partners to help junior lawyers build their practices. We address both issues below, along with another that receives less attention than it should: how the firm uses its partners' non-billable "firm" time.

1. Compensation Criteria

If a firm sets out to examine how it supports its partners' development, it could start with its compensation criteria: what is their effect on its partners' ability to build their practices? From the many written comments about compensation criteria in the Partner Development Survey, two major themes emerged:

- Too much emphasis on any one factor – such as origination credits or billable hours – distorts partners' behavior in ways that can hinder both their longer-term development and their willingness to contribute to other partners' careers.

- In many firms, partners believe the compensation criteria discourage collaboration, especially in developing business and helping newer partners to build their practices.

Many partners blamed too much emphasis on origination credits for creating "unhealthy competition between partners" and for undervaluing the contributions of "the attorneys who service the client and provide the expertise [that persuades] the client to remain at the firm." In other firms, partners blamed too much emphasis on billable hours (or personal billings) for encouraging lawyers to hoard work and spend too little time developing business. Some representative comments:

> *I am concerned that our comp. system discourages team work and focuses too much on the individual to the detriment of the organization. Further, I also believe it is structured so that the risk of success or failure is put squarely on the individual, not the firm, which discourages bold bets on market trends and growth opportunities backed by the firm.*
>
> *Our compensation system does not adequately incent senior partners to "pass down" work (i.e., billing credit) to junior partners ….*

These problems can be particularly damaging for junior partners who still depend on senior partners for much of their work, but simultaneously have to develop their own business if they are to progress. Here is one junior partner's description of the dilemma:

> *The senior partners … generally handle the pitches to the major clients … and they do not include mid-level partners in those pitches. Therefore, the originations that are necessary to help a mid-level partner move to the next level are not accessible…. [B]ecause originations are so critical to the movement of partners through the ranks, a mid-level partner cannot originate work from an existing client … even if the work is in a new area because the "billing partners" generally will not let go of their billing credits.*

2. Partner-to-partner support

A few years ago, a managing partner said that his most important job was to walk around the firm asking senior partners what they had done recently to build the career of a junior partner. We suspect he did not intend to exaggerate. His point was borne out by the Partner Development Survey. Of all forms of support for their careers, the partners who responded placed most value on the support they had received – after they became partners – from senior partners who had invested in their success. This support often takes the form of ongoing mentoring (advice, guidance and the passing on of wisdom), but it should also take the form of sponsorship: a willingness to share client relationships, aid other partners to develop business, share the credit for new work and, more generally, provide concrete help to partners trying to build their practices.

Judging by comments in the survey, especially those from laterals, firms vary widely in senior partners' willingness to provide this support. Some of the variation is cultural: over their history, some firms have created the expectation that senior partners have a responsibility to make the next generation successful, person by person. As the previous section noted, some of the variation arises from compensation criteria that encourage or discourage mutual support. Whatever the cause, if a firm's leaders see that senior partners are not doing all they should for the next generation, tackling that issue should be a priority. If the right expectations are not yet part of the firm's culture, the step may not be an easy one, and it may take years to bring about a significant improvement.

Here are some methods of moving in that direction:

- Modify the compensation criteria. Rewarding partners who hoard client relationships is only the most obvious danger. In some firms, partners feel under such pressure to bill more hours and generate more short-term revenue that they may not be willing to invest in their fellow partners' success unless rewards for that behavior are built into the compensation criteria. Even if a firm is unwilling to change its criteria for junior or mid-career partners because it wants to encourage individual entrepreneurialism, it should consider changing them for established senior partners.

- Modify the job description for practice-group and office leaders. They should be charged with ensuring that their junior partners are receiving the "sponsorship" they need to build their practices. That task may require difficult conversations with leaders who are not stepping up to this responsibility.

- Create some firm-wide oversight. Especially if a firm wants to create new expectations among its senior partners, it should establish processes that allow its management committee to prime the pump. These processes do not have to be – and probably should not be – formal and elaborate. The managing partner's habit described above is entirely informal but, in his firm, very effective. Another option: a member of the management committee meets periodically (perhaps every six months) with each practice group leader to discuss the specific, concrete support that senior partners in the group are providing to junior partners who are still building their practices. Yet another option, this one more formal: when the time for electing partners rolls around, the group leaders or senior partners who are sponsoring a candidate write a plan for building his or her practice after the election. If the firm has integration plans for its lateral partners, the questions on that form may provide a starting place for these "internal integration" plans.

3. Using "firm" time wisely

As a firm grows, it usually creates more and more managerial and administrative processes, each of which results in another task for some or all of its partners. Even if each task is relatively small, taken together they can consume time that could otherwise be invested in building a career.

Large firms in particular should add up the average time each partner devotes each year to recruiting, filling out evaluations, processing bills, responding to RFPs, and the like. The total can by eye-opening, even before including the time a smaller number of partners spend on committee assignments and important administrative roles such as running a summer program. Most of these tasks are important and some are unavoidable. If a firm allows its administrative task list to grow willy-nilly, however, and without regard to each task's value and efficiency, the opportunity cost may be significant: partners will have less time and energy to invest in building their practices.

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As yet, there is no consensus among law firms about how they should approach their partners' development, and the differences among them are striking. In many firms, the generation in charge still assumes that, once lawyers become partners, they should be able to stand on their feet unaided. In larger firms, while there may be little developmental support, there is often a lot of management: complicated compensation systems, mandatory individual plans, and real-time tracking of hours and revenue. Meanwhile, some firms have begun to invest seriously in their partners' development, usually by creating a training program on business development or leadership, perhaps with some extended coaching attached. A few firms are working on competency models for partners; some already have them for income partners.

In the next decade, law firms in competitive markets will have to take their partners' development much more seriously. As that change occurs, we expect to see a stronger consensus emerge about best practices, just as it has for associate development. This chapter has tried to provide a framework for firms that are embarking on this journey. The firms that move fastest down this road, we are convinced, will gain a significant competitive advantage over their peers.