

It's Time for Some Attention to Partners

By Steve Armstrong

It is hard to spot amid all the publicity about new models for managing associates, but a second change in how firms manage their talent is also underway. After years of focusing on associates, law firms are beginning to realize that they need to pay more attention to their partners. The change has been slow, and most firms still take a “sink or swim” approach to their partners’ careers. But more firms are concluding that the old approach has become too risky, because the waters in which their partners swim are too rough and their individual success is too critical to the firm’s overall success. Over the next decade or two, the firms that act on this insight are likely to gain a significant competitive advantage.

If a firm wants to pursue this advantage, what should it do? To answer that question, this article draws on a recent survey of more than 500 partners in 44 major firms in the U.S. and Canada whom their firms identified as successful. (The survey was conducted by Tim Leishman and Steve Armstrong of Firm Leader and David Cruickshank of Kerma Partners.) It explored the participants’ development after they became partners, the skills they regarded as most important to their present and future success, and the obstacles they saw in their paths.

FOCUS ON DEVELOPING PARTNERS, NOT JUST MANAGING THEM

As firms grow, they tend to create more elaborate systems for monitoring their partners’ performance: evaluation processes tied to their compensation; frequent monitoring of their hours, revenues, and billing discipline; mandatory annual plans; and the like. As useful and necessary as those processes are, they are designed primarily to see whether

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partners are succeeding, not to help them succeed.

RECOGNIZE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DEVELOPING PARTNERS AND DEVELOPING ASSOCIATES

For associates, the primary goal is to increase their proficiency across the range of skills that an apprentice lawyer should master. For partners, the primary goal is to increase their contribution to the firm’s success. As a result, the most successful “training” programs for partners are those that help the participants to decide how they can expand their practices — and, perhaps, contribute to the firm in other ways — and then help them to follow through on their plans. Along the way, the programs will also teach skills that can help the participants reach their goals. But the focus is on channeling and supporting the partner’s drive to succeed, not on “training” them across a generic range of partner competencies.

Typically, this kind of program unfolds over several months. It begins by asking the participants — before they ever gather in a room together — to walk through a structured process for analyzing their practices, defining their professional goals, deciding the steps they should take to reach those goals, and understanding the new habits or skills they may have to develop to take those steps. The program’s workshops then help them to refine those plans, begin to act on them, and collaborate with other partners who can help them. The workshops also focus on skills, but on ones that are specifically relevant to the program’s audience. (See below for some examples.) Most importantly, the program will provide ongoing support and discipline over several months to increase the likelihood that the participants will actually follow through with their plans. That support can take several forms: scheduled check-ins with external coaches, meetings with a practice-group leader, and periodic meetings among the participants.

RECOGNIZE THAT A PARTNER’S CAREER MAY PASS THROUGH DISTINCT STAGES

Each stage requires new goals and new skills. During a 30-year career, many partners pass through at least three stages:

1. When they first become partners, they learn how to act like partners rather than like first-rate associates. That change often requires changes not only in how they approach business development, but also in how they deal with clients and how they manage associates.
2. Once they have established themselves as partners, many go on to build “leveraged” practices that support more of the firm’s lawyers. To make this transition, they need a strategy for expanding their practice, more skill in business development, more ability to manage work even when they have little daily contact with it, and, often, more skill in collaborating with other partners on whose cooperation they must rely to develop business.
3. Later in their careers, some partners go on to assume broader roles in the firm: helping to build practice groups or offices, or otherwise expanding their contributions beyond the scope of their own practices. This transition also requires its own set of skills: for example, devising strategy, creating support for a goal that involves uncomfortable change, and handling conflicts effectively.

So far, the law firms that have focused on their partners’ development are focusing primarily on new partners. (There are exceptions: programs for group and office leaders, for example, and business-development programs for a range of partners.) This focus makes sense as a starting place because the transition from associate to partner can be difficult. But it should not be the exclusive focus. In fact, for many firms, the more important focus may be on the transition to a leveraged practice: the more partners who make that transition, the stronger the firm will be.

PAY ATTENTION TO ALL THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PARTNERS’ DEVELOPMENT

When a firm starts to invest more in its partners’ development, its first

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step is usually to create training or coaching program. As effective as these programs can be, they may ultimately be less important than other, more difficult steps. In the survey on which this article draws, partners were asked whether their firms' culture or systems impeded their development. Almost 40% answered "yes" — and these were partners whom their firms regarded as successful. Among established partners who were expanding their practices, the percentage rose to 50%. Their complaints focused on two issues:

- Compensation criteria that discouraged collaboration and encouraged the hoarding of work and clients.
- Not enough practical support — rather than just advice — from senior partners to help them build their practices. In some firms, senior part-

ners seem to take seriously their responsibility for helping the next generations of partners: They pass on client relationships and invite other partners into new business-development opportunities. In other firms, they seem to provide less of this critical support.

Tackling these two issues is more difficult than creating a training program but, for many firms, also more important. A third issue also warrants almost equal billing:

Many firms now have an annual planning process for their partners. Typically, it requires each partner to list goals for the coming year and is linked to the firm's compensation system. Often, these processes are less useful than they could be. A key step for improving them: involve practice leaders or other senior partners in shaping the goals — not only in reviewing them after they have been written — and in following up through the year as the partner moves toward a goal. Whatever

other tasks are on a practice leader's list, this is one of the most important. Can a practice head pay that much attention to every partner every year? Not unless the group is small. But he or she can pay more attention to some partners each year, especially those who are at key transitional points in their careers. Many practice leaders tend to focus on problem partners and stars, while not spending enough time with those who are doing well but have the potential to do even better.

CONCLUSION

The best strategy for speeding partners' development will vary across firms, depending on their size, culture, and practices. And some firms — those with stable, lucrative niches, or those with smaller partnerships and rigorous selection processes — may rationally decide that their partners are already performing as well as they need to. For the rest, however, there is an opportunity to be seized.

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