Firm Leader

Partner Development: It's a Different Game[1]

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For decades, most law firms assumed that professional development was all about associates because, by the time lawyers became partners, they were (of course) already fully developed. That assumption never made much sense. Most new partners have at least two-thirds of their careers in front of them, and how they perform during those years matters much more to their firms' health than how associates perform. But the assumption lived on throughout the decades of easy profits, because so many partners could float safely until they retired on the current of work flowing through their firms.

When that current turned into dangerous rapids in the 2000s, however, law firms woke up to the dangers of a sink-or-swim approach to their partners' careers. In the Hobbesian world that most firms now inhabit, the years that lie ahead of a newly minted partner will be far more challenging than even the most competitive race to partnership, and will require an intimidating range of abilities beyond those associates develop:

- The business-development and client-relationship skills to succeed in a competitive marketplace
- The managerial and leadership skills to build and retain 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, sometimes including partners from different countries and legal cultures
- The business acumen to manage a practice's strategy and profitability

Moreover, the skills that are most important to a partner's success tend to change during a long career. In fact, the careers of many successful partners involve three difficult transitions *after* they become partners. Once they have established self-sustaining practices (the first transition), ambitious partners find ways to leverage their practices, generating 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 skills and behaviors.

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In the next decades, the firms that become most effective at helping their partners move through these transitions will gain a significant competitive advantage over their peers. But there is a challenge along the way: The methods firms have used to develop associates won't work as well for partners, because the primary goal is quite different. For associates, it's to develop the range of legal skills and expertise they need to function as "fully grown" lawyers. For partners, it's 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*, and that's a difference that has consequences.

First, a strategy for developing associates is usually built around formal firm-wide processes, 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 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 even the best-designed group-oriented process or program. As a result, the ongoing conversations partners have about their goals with other partners, especially group heads or other leaders, can do more to help them succeed than anything else. In too many firms, however, these conversations take place only during the partner evaluation and compensation process, which is inevitably mostly about rewards, not development.

Second, the focus for partners' development – especially for equity partners – should be on the medium and long term, not solely on the next 12 months. Focusing on the longer term means much more than creating a longer to-do list; it means thinking strategically about your practice's future in the context of your group and firm. It's disconcerting, therefore, that many of the annual plans firms ask partners to complete focus almost entirely on the short term. It's also troublesome that so many business-development training and coaching programs focus on short-term tactics divorced from longer-term strategies for building a specific practice over time in a specific market.

Given these contexts, a firm's efforts to speed the growth of its partners' practices is likely to succeed only if it is based on principles that, while they reflect the familiar andragogical principles that apply also to associates, differentiate partner development from associate development.[2] In our experience, three principles matter most: for partners, developmental programs and processes should be "goal-driven," "strength-based," and "situation-specific."

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[2] The andragogical principles initially developed by Malcom Knowles in the 1970s have been phrased in a variety of ways. Here is one useful formulation: Adult learners (1) are internally motivated and self-directed, (2) bring their life experience to bear, (3) are goal-oriented, (4) are relevancy-oriented, and (5) like to be respected.

Goal-Driven. The most important form of support may be simply helping partners to define longer-term goals that are realistic enough to seem achievable and attractive enough to be motivational, and then helping them move towards those goals. What makes a goal-setting process effective? In summary, the goals should be:

- 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) who can offer help, not only advice.

As this list suggests, a goal-driven approach requires a degree of collaboration that isn't yet common in annual planning processes. A set of goals constructed by a partner in solitude, and only then discussed as part of the firm-wide annual process, is usually not a superb plan. Firms that want to take individual goal-setting seriously should ensure that goals are drafted after discussions not only with a group leader, but also in group partner meetings.

Strength-Based. Coaching, mentoring and training are most effective when they are based on partners' individual strengths, both professional and personal. 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. 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.

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. Many firms discovered this truth as they tried to persuade partners to adopt project-management techniques: the efforts gained traction, ultimately, not because of training programs, but because the firm's internal experts began to provide "just-in-time" training to partners who realized they needed help to manage alternative fee arrangements or respond to their clients' complaints about fees.

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 or develop a new habit? 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.
- 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.

These two methods go hand-in-glove: the habit of "conscious practice" is more likely to become ingrained if a coach helps to monitor it.

The "goal-driven," "strength-based," and "situation-specific" approach can be applied in a variety of contexts: training programs, annual planning and goal-setting processes, and formal or informal mentoring or coaching programs. However, the approach tilts towards an organized, ongoing dialogue about individual goals and strategies, and away from relying too heavily on training programs, evaluations, and compensation – the basic building blocks for most associate-development programs – to drive partners' development.