Translating Leadership into Projects

Law firm managing partners are often frustrated by the slow pace of progress by fellow leaders toward business and strategic goals.

By David Cruickshank

Looking at at their practice group and client team leaders, they say things like:

- "I have the right people in position, but they are not moving the needle."

- "Our leaders spend too much time on the wrong things - internal office moves take priority over targeting new business, for example."

- "We have even given our leaders job descriptions, but they see themselves more as managers than leaders of new initiatives."

Having worked on legal project management for some years now, I wondered how to translate these leadership challenges into projects. And if so translated, will project management discipline apply?

One solution - managing partners could help practice leaders develop *leadership project descriptions*. In project management terms, you are "scoping" your leadership project with your client. And your client is the firm. A leader should describe a leadership project to the managing partner as she would a client project - with measurable results, a time frame and a resources budget.

Some of my experienced-based assumptions are required first. (1) Nearly all practice leaders are also fee-earning partners, so their time for leadership has to be well spent. (2) Next, they can probably only manage 1-3 new initiatives at a time. (3) Unlike client demands, they prefer to have open-ended time frames for new projects, and very loose accountability to the managing partner. The leadership project description addresses all these issues.

Let me illustrate an example and unpack it.

Leadership Project Description for a Practice Group Leader

I will start and complete three new business development initiatives that cut across other practice groups and my group. Each of the initiatives will:

- Target profitable work, within the firm's strategic scope, from new clients or existing clients
- Engage partners from at least two practice groups
- Target at least $100,000 in billable work.
- Success will be measured by getting to the final round in an RFP process or winning some work in all three by June 30, 2013.
- If any of the initiatives falters before September 30, 2012, I will replace it with another similar one.

These are some of the features of a good project description, all found in the example above:

- Individual accountability - "I will"
- Concrete - number of targets, groups, amounts
- Measurable outcomes, time and quantity
- Connects to strategy - building multi-group capacity and visibility.

Compared to the vague business development goals that we often see in practice groups, the leadership project description is a far better tool for both the managing partner and the practice group leader. As with a good client project, we will have a basis for allocating resources to the project and we will know exactly what has been accomplished.

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