

Leadership is Baaaack

Welcome back, leadership development. The profession has missed you.

By Douglas Richardson

Prior to the great recessionary train wreck, leadership development had become a hot topic in law firm strategic thinking. Firms of all sizes, but particularly those undergoing rapid growth, post-merger integration and/or dramatic multi-office expansion, realized that law firms have become sophisticated economic engines requiring powerful and sophisticated leadership. Succession planning was moving rapidly away from the time-honored “Okay, Bob, it’s your turn to run things for a couple of years” model. The need was clear to identify and groom top leadership talent.

Pre-recession leadership development programs took various forms in the quest to identify and support firms’ most powerful or promising lawyers: weeklong full-immersion off-site programs; comprehensive leadership assessment; individual leadership assessment and coaching; internally led group programs on firm governance, operations and economics; and confidential long-term *consigliari* coaching support.

In one cutting-edge example publicized in *The American Lawyer*, Buchanan, Ingersoll & Rooney took a group of 14 high-potential younger partners and provided each with an individualized program that combined leadership assessment, group programs, creating an individual development plan, and a year of personal coaching with an outside coach. Leadership development programs, of course, are a discretionary expense, potentially quite a large one. When the recession hit, more pressing financial priorities and tighter firm budgets heavily impacted professional development and back-burnered many leadership development programs. Consultants, coaches and internal professional development staff shrugged, sighed “What can ya’ do?” and resolved to wait out the downturn.

Now that the weather forecast is at least partially sunny, leadership development is getting renewed attention, and the purse strings are loosening in many firms. We see a changed emphasis, however. There is diminished focus on succession planning and developing the strategic vision of top firm leadership, and a far greater emphasis on developing the hands-on skills of practice group leaders, client team leaders, office managing partners, and anyone else responsible for any of the firm’s profit centers.

Leadership gurus and consultants have long distinguished between the functions of leadership and management, but we often see that line blurring at the practice group and office management level. Yes, the troops need to see strategic vision, skilled planning, superior interpersonal skills and collaboration-building abilities, but the hard realities of the bottom line place now equal emphasis on here-and-now management skills: organizing, budgeting, staffing, monitoring and directing those troops. Because lawyers by temperament generally are not highly collaborative, any program that fosters effective and consistent communication, collaboration and cohesiveness can have immediate positive bottom-line impact.

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