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Train Your Associates and Watch Them Flourish ... and Business Grow

By Kimberly Alford Rice

As a law firm leader, you have read over and over about the value of educating your associates in business development skills to help them develop their own clients quicker, mitigate their overhead and become more valuable to the firm's bottom line. And it is no secret that there is a significant gap between associates' law school education on all things theory-based and engaging in professional training on how to step-by-step develop a book of business and be profitable in a private practice.

In this tough competitive environment, however, how often does your management team seriously consider concrete ways to educate your associates on how to win new clients in the most productive ways possible? Having worked with hundreds of lawyers over many years, we have encountered few associates who are *unwilling* to learn new skill sets, develop professionally and make valuable contributions to secure their futures with their firms. And those few who are a bit under-motivated don't last long for a host of reasons.

Developing the Skills

There are so many ways to deliver business development skills training to your associates that will positively affect their productivity and professional development that it is almost irresponsible from a leadership perspective not to provide these skills. Why, then, is there so little political will in some firms to provide these useful programs? One explanation we've heard repeatedly is that management recalls how they pulled themselves up by the bootstraps back "in the day" to figure out the business development puzzle themselves, and don't see the need to spend the firm's money to spoon feed their young lawyers. Think again, we advise.

In this post-recession era, it has never been more important for lawyers to be educated and adequately equipped for new business development — to contribute to the profitable growth of their firm, to become partners, and to have a more fulfilling practice.

continued on page 2

Associate Training

continued from page 1

Rainmakers Aren't Born ...

As we have often seen, most lawyers are not natural rainmakers, though all lawyers can be educated to become effective business developers in accordance with their unique skills, personality and practice focus — by experienced trainers who know the legal profession well and ethical rules relating to client communications and confidentiality.

Even if a lawyer is primarily an internal service partner, he/she still must communicate and interact effectively with the firm's partners and staff. To that end, every lawyer has a responsibility within the business development process, but the roles may vary. To effectively communicate is mandatory for lawyers — and firms would be wise to consistently emphasize this fact as they evaluate their business development needs.

In today's law firms, more times than not, in-house marketing staffs, as well-intentioned and experienced as they may be, are often not best suited to initiate training programs that will deliver measurable results. Despite their marketing backgrounds, internal marketing staff may not be the most effective trainers or coaches to help guide lawyers in their business development endeavors. They rarely have the resources or time to provide the one-on-one coaching support on an ongoing basis, which is imperative to a successful training program. Don't lose sight of your objective just to save a few dollars. In the end, you'll get what you pay for when investing in training your lawyers and equipping them for long-term success.

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Regardless of whether firms choose to work with outside consultants or keep their training in-house, lawyers must recognize that they are the firm's crucial sales team. All lawyers must have basic client relations and communications skills — whether or not they actually engage in the sales process. That is just part and parcel for being in private practice.

Keep in mind that a miniscule percentage of lawyers, typically 5%-7% in a given firm, are natural rainmakers. Of the 93%-95% remaining lawyers, usually a healthy percentage (60%-70%) are eager to develop new work and have been trying on their own with limited success. That leaves the unfortunate 20% or so who are uninterested in developing new work, and are not motivated to participate in any training efforts. Identify the second tier of willing players and focus on providing them with the practical tools and ongoing support necessary for long-term growth.

Bottom line, with the reduced demand for many legal services and brutal economic changes, firms would benefit from a formal annual review and evaluation of their overall business development programs, regardless of whether they employ salespeople, if their program is facilitated internally or outside support is utilized.

Anatomy of a Strong Business Development Skills Training Program

Tailored Curriculum

Regardless of firm size, developing a formal training program can effectively address a broad range of topics imperative to a lawyer's success. Typical program topics may include:

- Developing personalized, practical business development plans.
- Step-by-step marketing plan execution.
- Learning the art of effective networking.
- Developing and communicating a personal brand.
- Harnessing the power of active listening.
- Increasing business development success rates.
- Expanding existing client relationships.
- Identifying potential new clients and referral sources.
- Improving client service skills.
- Becoming more effective in potential client meetings.

The best learning occurs when there are interactive activities such as role play, video presentations, performance critiques, and use of other learning tools to better engage the attorney participants and to optimize peer-to-peer learning. Attorneys need to process their training in an integrated manner to develop new habits that are imperative to their success.

The most effective training programs are customized to the specific lawyer audience (associates versus partners or specific practice groups, for example), are practical, and are focused on getting tangible results. Tangibility is not always measured only by "new client retentions," but also by lawyers developing positive disciplines and habits to integrate into their everyday lives that will pay dividends throughout their careers.

Ideally, each training session is scheduled in digestible modules and around the fact that attorneys' billable requirements do not allow for large blocks of time away from their offices. During the interactive sessions, lawyers will learn practical skills and useful tools that can be applied immediately to increase the regularity and success rate of their marketing activities. At the same time, they will begin to craft customized plans that identify individual business development opportunities.

Associate Training

Reality-Based Situations and Applications

For a customized training program to be successful and heed long-term results, the curriculum and interactive learning must include reality-based situations — what business development challenges attorney participants are facing and struggling with today. Because attorneys are trained in procedure and adapting a set of facts to apply them, the best training programs are designed to allow for functional, immediate application of new techniques.

Personal One-on-One Coaching

Ongoing follow-up individual coaching reinforces new concepts learned during the training program, establishes solid habits and keeps lawyers focused on accomplishing their goals that lead to long-term success. The coach acts as strategist, adviser, and sounding board to help each lawyer prepare for upcoming opportunities, brainstorm new approaches, course-correct and stay on track. This is a win-win investment for every firm.

Program Benefits

Given that your greatest firm asset is found in your people, firms that engage in formal business development skills training will realize many benefits that are not exclusive to the associates who participate. First, investing in your lawyers' development sends a strong positive message to all personnel that management values the younger lawyers in the firm, their continuing education and the value they bring to the firm, now and in the future.

Second, the goodwill developed between associates and partners cannot be underestimated as associates recognize the investment the partnership is making in their success. Third, because of the above, associates will be more motivated and empowered to want to be successful for the firm and will commit themselves to embracing the training and the supplemental coaching and homework assignments required.

Last, because of the firm's investment in the success of its associates, lawyers will develop new marketing, selling and client service skills and behaviors, learn how to identify the best business development opportunities, and generate more revenue for law firm. Savvy law firm leaders understand that this combination is a win-win for their firms, their attorneys, and ultimately, for their clients. Why wouldn't a firm make this investment especially when the stakes are so high?

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