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## **Leadership Development Programs: What They Are and How to Start One**

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Leadership competencies are critical for lawyers on many fronts: effectively running teams, building a practice, managing talent, executing formal leadership positions, and so forth. While leadership is not taught in law school, many firms have begun to implement formal leadership development programs. Still in the early stages of acceptance, these programs can range from a collection of specific training programs to a more comprehensive approach including an organized curriculum, senior advisors, individual coaching, leadership development plans and formal feedback. If your firm is interested in starting a comprehensive program, below are some factors to consider.

### **Executive Buy-In**

A leadership development program is a complex initiative that needs to be championed at the highest level of leadership at your firm in order to gain traction. Preferably your CEO, managing partner, or an Executive Committee member, this champion must be the voice of your program internally and communicate its importance to the future of the firm.

### **Program Design**

Your program goals need to be specific to your firm and its culture. Research other law firm precedents, corporate initiatives, university programs and external consultant offerings. Consider what the firm wants to accomplish. Who will participate – practice group leaders, high potential partners, rainmakers, all partners, associates, non-lawyer professionals? Does the firm have the internal resources to develop, design, implement, manage and sustain a program? If not, look to external consultants. Make sure to get references and ask to see examples of similar work.

### **Cost**

Cost will depend on program design. Once your proposal and subsequent budget has been approved, establish a separate account for program expenses and a separate billing number to keep track of time. Keep in mind the potential costs associated with travel for participants, coaches and consultants.

### **Program Administrator**

Programs of this nature do not run themselves. They require a dedicated administrator to be part of the planning process from the beginning. The administrator needs to understand the

purpose of the program, the firm's goals and the selection process. Your experienced Professional Development team, with their skill set, insight and industry knowledge is a natural choice to take ownership of, and manage, your program.

## **Participant Selection**

Participants can be selected in many ways, depending on your firm's culture. The CEO can make independent selections or there can be a nomination process. The key is to clearly define the selection process and to make sure that those who are asked to participate understand why they are part of the program. Communication is critical to a successful program. There should be no confusion as to why and how participants were selected. Unanticipated situations may arise that prevent a participant from fully committing to the program. Accordingly, you may want to think about a no-fault, opt-out for your participants.

## **Core Curriculum**

A survey or needs assessment can be helpful to identify the key leadership skills to include in your core training curriculum. The results of an upward feedback process or even input from your associates' committee can also be helpful in determining topics. At a minimum, your curriculum should include a broad overview of leadership and some of its key components such as effective communication, talent management and development, and emotional intelligence. If your program is geared toward partners and senior associates, you also may wish to include business development skills.

Training sessions should be as interactive as possible and allow for dialog and an exchange of ideas. Training material should include best practices, tools and the chance to implement them. Hypothetical scenarios, case studies and firm specific scenarios are great tools to generate discussion and learning. Most important is the opportunity for participants to practice skills between training sessions.

## **Individual Development Plans**

Require participants to set specific goals, and hold them accountable over the course of the program to reinforce their learning. Because leadership is so broad and multifaceted, each participant will likely be working on developing different competencies. Development plans must be concrete and specific in terms of skills and behaviors that a participant plans to have developed by the conclusion of the program. For example, a practice group leader might have transformed productivity issues in the groups, or a client team leader might have repaired a key relationship. In addition, participants should be given specific opportunities to stretch their targeted development by assuming an actual leadership position or running a sizeable team or project.

## **Coaches**

Coaches can be instrumental, particularly if participants will be expected to work on individual development plans throughout a program that lasts for many months. External coaches can help participants set goals and identify action items, debrief and provide feedback, and keep participants motivated. Perhaps the most important function a coach can provide is to help participants remain accountable. In addition, coaches provide a safe and confidential sounding

board for participants as they process issues or challenges they face in pursuing their goals. Internal senior advisers, perhaps even former graduates of your program, can provide participants with an internal resource to discuss leadership tactics, opportunities and progress.

## **Assessments**

Since a great deal of leadership is based on emotional intelligence, particularly self-awareness and self-regulation, assessments can be critical to the learning process. Assessments that help the participants understand their personality and/or behavioral preferences (*e.g.*, MBTI, LSI, DISC, Birkman) or their emotional competencies (ECI) are helpful tools. 360° feedback geared toward a participant's developmental goals is also critical in terms of goal achievement. Usually geared around a participant's goals, the feedback solicited can help identify development areas and blind spots and how participants can leverage their strengths in the process.

## **Measurement**

The best way to determine if your program is having a positive impact is to assign metrics and track progress. For example, identify indicators of leadership for each of the participants and develop a way to assess their success year to year. You might also consider metrics at the practice group or firm level. External rankings such as the various American Lawyer surveys and lists can also be helpful.

## **Conclusion**

No matter what shape or form your leadership development program takes, you must ensure that adequate levels of support, resources and communication are invested in the program in order to ensure the learning and impact are sustainable both for the participants and the culture of your firm. In addition to the direct benefits of increasing the caliber of leadership in your firm, leadership development programs can be a powerful recruiting tool.

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