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Leadership Skills Development Is Lawyer Skills Development

by Michele L. Bendekovic and Sandra Magliozzi

The legal landscape has changed dramatically over the past 18 months. The harsh realities of job losses, firm closings, rescinded offers, deferred start dates, elimination of summer programs, and reinvigorated client scrutiny have left their marks on our industry. However, the changing landscape affords us an opportunity to respond to the crisis by providing our law students and lawyers with the skills they need to be better practitioners sooner rather than later.

The overall success of a law firm depends on the skills of the firm's lawyers and their agility in adapting and responding to changing client needs. Clients look for their lawyers to add value by helping clients achieve their business goals. To do this, a firm needs a strong and well developed associate bench so that legal work can be done where it is most effectively and efficiently performed.

Leadership skills are critical in providing lawyers with the agility they need to respond to client needs. Leadership skills help lawyers establish credibility, maintain relationships, and create solutions for their clients. The development of leadership skills is essential to the development of good lawyering skills. Leadership skills should therefore be included in the professional and practice skills we develop in new lawyers. By helping law students and junior associates develop leadership skills at the outset of their careers, we can increase their ability to deliver the highest level of service.

What Do We Mean by Leadership Skills?

“Leadership skills,” “developing leaders,” “what makes a leader,” “what it takes to be a leader” — we have all heard or said those phrases. But what do we really mean when we think of and talk about leadership skills in the context of training our new and junior lawyers? Does the term “leadership” set expectations that are too high? No, not if we focus on the development of leadership skills rather than the development of individual leaders. Leadership skills add value now and make associates better lawyers whether they ever assume a position of firm leadership or not. The development of leadership skills allows associates to develop themselves, to lead their own work, and to take on more responsibility as they progress and lead projects, cases, and teams.

Robert Cullen, who teaches “Leadership for Lawyers” at Santa Clara Law, identifies essential leadership skills in his book *The Leading Lawyer: A Guide to Practicing Law and Leadership*. The list includes —

- credibility, which encompasses expertise and integrity;
- drive and determination, which help associates seek responsibility and take initiative;
- innovation, entrepreneurship, and creative problem solving, which inspire engagement, thinking like an owner, and finding solutions;

- communication and persuasion, expanding a lawyers' ability to communicate beyond advocacy; and
- relationship building, which includes collaboration and teamwork.

While no list is exhaustive, the parallels between these leadership skills and the skills that firms repeatedly say students and junior associates need to become good practitioners are evident. These include, but are certainly not limited to, skills in strategic thinking, problem solving, communication, relationship building, establishment of credibility, and professionalism.

However firms and/or law schools label these skills, they are leadership skills, and they are what firms often wait to develop and teach in leadership programs for more senior lawyers. Teaching these skills earlier will prepare law students and new associates just entering the profession for the actual practice of law and for serving internal and external clients. The benefits of these skills in a law student's or an associate's toolkit is that they add value to a firm and its clients. They also plant the seeds necessary for future leadership roles and equip associates for success throughout all levels of their careers.

Opportunities for Greater Collaboration between Law Schools and Firms

As a result of our economy and the financial crisis, law firms are being forced to take a critical look at their models of operation and possibly shift those models to stay competitive. Clients demand this self-examination and, in some instances, are not willing to take on the cost of inexperienced associates billing on their projects. By developing the leadership skill set from the beginning of an associate's career, firms are able to deepen their associate bench strength, which adds value for clients.

There is an incentive for firms to do this. In this economy, clients are looking for lawyers who can be collaborative in solving their problems and in reaching their overall goals. Clients are no longer looking merely for advocacy and analytical skills. They are looking for creative thinkers, team players, and leaders at all levels. Adding these skills to an associate's repertoire will enable associates to take on more responsibility earlier in their careers and begin to develop an ownership mentality. They will start to think like leaders.

In June, NALP and The NALP Foundation sponsored the first in a series of Roundtable discussions on the Future of Lawyer Hiring, Development and Advancement. This Roundtable brought together a panel of law firm partners, law school deans, in-house counsel, and NALP professionals. Part of their discussion centered on law student and lawyer professional development and the need to increase professional development in this critical economic time. This Roundtable series has opened the door for an ongoing dialogue that will begin to address this practical skill development. Even before the Roundtables began, NALP's Lawyer Professional Development and Law Student Professional Development Sections conducted a survey that included 35 law school and 49 employer participants. The findings were that schools and employers do not work on professional development in isolation and that there is a need for an ongoing and interactive dialogue to bridge the gap between student and lawyer development. The Roundtable also suggested that "law schools and law firms need to help young lawyers understand from the earliest possible point how they fit into the service continuum." Roundtable participants noted the need to develop not only "more technical, clinical, [and] oral advocacy skills... but also softer skills, such as emotional intelligence, relating to clients, [and] leadership...."

Neither side can take on the task of practical skill development — including leadership skills — alone. This must be a collaborative campaign. There are examples of law schools and law firms that are thinking about innovative ways to in-

crease experience and skills. For example, Washington and Lee School of Law replaced its third-year curriculum with a series of simulated and actual practice experiences and instruction in professionalism. Santa Clara University School of Law, University of Maryland School of Law, and Elon University School of Law are integrating leadership skills into their curriculums. Ford & Harrison, a nationwide labor and employment firm headquartered in Atlanta, developed a Year One Program and waived billable hour requirements for their first-year associates. Washington, DC-based litigation firm Howrey has built an apprenticeship program for its incoming associates.

We can also look to international colleagues who have systems in place for law school graduates to serve as apprentices before becoming fully practicing lawyers. But ultimately we must work together to bridge the gap.

Professional and practice skills development becomes the foundation — the place where we need to start — and the inclusion of leadership skills is the key to differentiating those who will succeed and fail in the future. If law schools and law firms are to bridge the skills gap, what can we each expect the other to do? What can we do together?

Only recently have firms begun to articulate their values and link them to lawyer competencies, and most still have not fully linked these values and competencies to their hiring or compensation models. Law firms need to hire and compensate based on the skills they require. Similarly, if law schools are to better prepare students for practice they need to teach and assess the knowledge, skills, and attributes their students will need to succeed after the bar exam. Firms and law schools both need to better align themselves with the skills and compe-

tencies needed to do the work of lawyering and to become an excellent practitioner.

Law schools and legal employers need to understand that developing practical lawyering and leadership skills is a shared, collaborative responsibility, as is helping students understand how to translate these skills into becoming a good practitioner. The authors of this article do not have magic answers about how to do this. We do need to come to some consensus as a profession about the core competencies needed for law practice in the 21st century and the benchmark experiences needed to enter practice. What we are hoping is that the dialogue that has begun will continue and that we will further explore how we can think and work together to develop our young professionals to become successful lawyers and even future leaders.

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Note: One way this dialogue will continue will be through the next in the series of NALP/NALP Foundation Roundtables, which will take place in December and focus on lawyer training and professional development.