

Developing Your “Superkeepers”

The Keys to Cultivating High-Potential Legal Leadership

By Douglas B. Richardson, JD, MA

The face of professional development in the legal profession is changing. In an era of intense competition and escalating talent costs, the concept of competency has assumed a bigger, broader meaning. Today it goes beyond the mastery of superior legal skills and includes the ability to interact, professionally and appropriately, with diverse people in diverse situations. It includes the ability to build relationships — with clients, with colleagues, with professionals and non-professionals — with *everyone* relevant to the success of an engagement or transaction. It includes that combination of intellectual acumen and personal influence we call leadership, the palette of skills that allow a top lawyer not only to think strategically, but also to motivate others to pursue that vision and to shape others' attitudes and performance along the way. In short, competency includes both technical competencies and behavioral competencies. Today, professional development clearly must address both.

The corporate sector has been addressing this reality for several decades, developing a whole array of interrelated human resources disciplines: human resources development (HRD), organizational development (OD), succession planning, competency modeling, “hi-pot” programs for the high-potential leaders of the future, diversity initiatives, top team building, executive assimilation, multi-rater evaluations (called “360’s” because the evaluation elicits feedback from superiors, peers and subordinates), and executive coaching. All this is new and exotic territory even for large firms, much less for medium-sized firms and legal departments not dancing on the legal profession’s cutting edge. Professional development experts know that they’re playing catch-up — but they also know that the book is worth the candle.

“We have to address the needs of our brightest and best to maintain leadership continuity,” says a partner with a large national

firm. “But we also have to attend to the needs of all our lawyers, not just the fast-trackers. These are dollars-and-cents issues. There’s a reason why retention is a hot topic: it costs about \$350,000 in actual costs and ‘friction-losses’ to replace a fourth-year associate. And firms with weak leadership disappear or get acquired.”

A Hard Look at Soft Skills

Young lawyers obviously still need to learn and perfect their “hard” legal skills — the sets, subsets and sub-sub-sets of their chosen legal discipline. CLE, internal programs and external providers all are attacking the challenge of using time and technology to develop programs that are both effective and efficient sources for hard skills. But for many lawyers, the whole domain of “soft skills” remains *terra incognita*, a marshy terrain peopled by touchy-feely aliens who seem more concerned with process than results and who constantly ask their colleagues to “share their feelings.” Yes, there certainly are enlightened souls out there who recognize that developing the next generation of leaders requires significant, explicit attention. But there remain a lot of deaf ears who believe that leaders are born and not made. “Our job is to recognize genius,” says one 60+ partner of a white-shoes firm, “not to try to manufacture geniuses.”

Good Lawyers: Not Necessarily Good Leaders

Another problem is that legal leadership takes so many forms. Different lawyers may show different aptitudes for the practical demands of practice leadership, project leadership, client development leadership, firm governance, or leadership in the community and the profession. A great rainmaker, for example, may cut quite a different figure from the firm’s director of *pro bono* activity.

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Still, all leadership draws on certain core competencies that combine the lawyer's traditional strong suit, rational analysis, with superior people skills and situational savvy. Collectively, these behavioral competencies are sometimes lumped together under the label "emotional intelligence." In fact, EQ goes by many names — social judgment, appropriateness, maturity, street smarts, empathy, and political adroitness. Whatever you call them, they are the behavioral competencies that harness the human factors in law firm success (better than, say, the whip, the hug, or an aggressive dominance over others). The practical question is how best to develop these core competencies — in all lawyers, at all stages of their professional career?

Costs and Barriers

Historically, a law firm's existing leaders were responsible for grooming the successor generation. Unfortunately, this approach may produce a lot of protégés made in their master's image — at worst, talking dogs that talk and walk lockstep in the fashion of the current leader but who may have their own unique motivational "drivers," agenda, style, strengths and soft spots. Genius is hard to replicate, hard to copy. Furthermore, even the most natural leaders often have a hard time describing how they work their magic, how they instinctively know what to do. That means that the firm's current top dogs may have a hard time schooling the up-and-comers. Top-tier tutelage doesn't happen in a day or a week; it builds on a lengthy process of growth, trial-and-error, and accretion of judgment that can take years. Given the myriad other time demands on senior attorneys, it is hardly surprising that nurturance of hi-pots often gets inconsistent attention and sends mixed-messages to the very people it

most needs to motivate. The idea of creating a leadership plan for designated superkeepers, a detailed agenda with standards and structure, may be anathema to the old guard. "It's simple," they may say. "I did it without a lot of hand-holding. Why can't these new people take care of themselves?"

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Some probably can. Others maybe not. But the cost of acquiring and nurturing legal talent these days is far too high to risk having a potential champion be dropped by the wayside. One large east coast firm once bragged of its "social Darwinism" approach to grooming talent: "We throw 'em in the deep end," said its managing partner, "and in a few years we come back to see who's still afloat." Clearly some hard lessons were learned: today this firm is a leader in listening to its lawyers, fostering personalized development plans and alternative career paths — and in investing in its superkeepers.

Enter the Coach

In the corporate sector, the need for soft skills guidance and support for superkeepers has led to increasing use of executive coaches skilled in enhancing situational savvy, interpersonal skills, effective communication, team-building and collaborative abilities. At the superkeeper level, corporations that have combined long-term coaching and succession-planning — Philadelphia's giant

Rohm & Haas chemical company, for example — report gratifying long-term results: continuity of leadership, tight-knit cultures, committed followers and leaders who can put their own unique mark on their tenure, while preserving the organization's strategic momentum.

But there are several problems with enlisting executive coaches, particularly in organizations that haven't used them extensively before, which includes most law firms. First, coaching is commonly perceived as a remedial rather than developmental process. It is seen as the fix for people who are in trouble, plateaued or falling behind. A lot of successful executive coaching does indeed take this form: it is structured as a fixed-term transaction, an intervention, designed to address specific problem behaviors or gaping holes in someone's repertoire. This form of coaching often is positioned as a "do-this-or-else" proposition framed more in terms of short-term behavior modification than self-discovery and self-mastery. It is an approach tailored more to developing day-to-day management skills than long-term leadership abilities.

A process regarded as remedial help — or even punishment — for stragglers is unlikely to appeal to the fast trackers, many of whom already have internalized the message that leadership is a lonely art and that the best leaders are those who can take care of themselves, particularly in aggressive, dog-eat-dog organizations or professions.

Doing It Right

So how do you coach legal superkeepers for leadership success? How can a firm best support the metamorphosis from superior associate to successful partner?

First, coaching support must be positioned as a perk, a positive investment in the individual, rather than a response to some deficit. This will not happen merely by the orga-

nization saying, “This is good for you.” It does happen when the organization sends clear signals of a positive and lasting commitment to helping its achievers become hyper-achievers. While building the trust of superkeepers demands that much of the coaching content be kept absolutely confidential, the law firm should advertise the fact that sophisticated support is being provided to emerging talent on a sustained basis. “If we can make the availability of a coach a positive thing, an entitlement,” says a senior partner with a large national law firm, “then we don’t risk stigmatizing someone if it’s revealed that he or she is getting coaching.”

Conversely, the “coachee” needs to understand that coaching is an expensive (in terms of both time and money) investment that must be accorded an appropriate priority. Years ago, when a new coachee called me his “executive accessory” to his peers, I knew this engagement was headed for trouble. One professional services firm makes it clear that hi-pots selected for coaching support must “use it or lose it.” Simply going through the motions will result in revocation of the entitlement.

Second, all successful performance coaching depends on the active involvement of the organization in recognizing and supporting positive behavior. Feedback is essential as learning progresses. Leadership development feeds on candid, supportive relationships with superiors, peers and subordinates.

Unfortunately, it is axiomatic, especially in larger organizations, that the higher you go, the less feedback you get; life gets increasingly isolated as you ascend. Moreover, getting supportive feedback — especially from peers — can be problematic in highly-competitive professional settings: the revelation that one is receiving coaching may stigmatize the coachee. So-called “360” multi-rater reviews that invite peers, subordinates and superiors to comment on an individual’s

strengths and weaknesses are common in the corporate world; in a law firm setting, inviting criticism from professional colleagues risks exposing the coachee’s soft spots and touching off a feeding frenzy.

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To counterbalance this feedback vacuum, design of top-level coaching programs must include explicit steps for making sure that superkeepers get regular, objective and fair feedback from trusted and *important* colleagues. Without reinforcement and corrective feedback, even the most gifted hi-pots risk heading down the wrong path, making the wrong friends or developing styles that will impair their long-term advancement. For years this feedback function has been performed informally — but powerfully — through mentoring relationships: the superkeeper gets essential guidance from a highly-invested champion or sponsor.

Unfortunately, in ever-larger multi-office firms with legions of emerging talent, a lot of potential superkeepers may get orphaned: no sponsor, no leverage, little visibility, fewer plum assignments, less client exposure and — perhaps most important — no sage advice and counsel about the informal determinants of firm success. Many firms are experimenting with structured mentoring or assigned-preceptor programs. However, because most lawyers are schooled as lawyers and not performance coaches, the quality of this feedback usually is better on

hard legal skills than on soft skills or matters of personal style. Many lawyers feel uncomfortable playing psychologist or psychiatrist or commenting on problematic attitudes or behaviors of fellow professionals. For experienced coaches, on the other hand, such counseling is their core competency.

Third, the coaching agenda must focus both on learning practical tactics and techniques and on developing the self-awareness to use them appropriately. This does not require that coaching resemble psychoanalysis or therapy. It does require that coaches develop perspective — not only into what they are doing, but into *why they are doing it*. The best senior-level coaches have what Dr. Karol Wasylyshyn calls “behavioral insight,” meaning that they are trained to consider all dimensions of the person when rendering advice: motivations, values, attitudes, aptitudes, life histories, strengths and blind spots.

Dr. Wasylyshyn also notes that the best way to engage smart businesspeople is through collecting and feeding back hard data — for example, through the use of standardized assessment tools that provide feedback in the form of objective, quantitative information. However, baseline assessment and goal-setting should include both quantitative and qualitative measures. The coachee may be intrigued by a voluminous data-dump of assessment information, but the learning engagement comes with the skillful interpretation of that information to reveal underlying themes, forces and factors — both positive and negative. Coaches enamored of one-size-fits-all models find that superkeepers naturally press for expression of their unique characteristics; they are far less interested in the attributes they share with the common herd. When they feel that they are not being seen or treated as individuals, their enthusiasm rapidly wanes.

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Finally, superkeeper coaching takes time. The development and refinement of any competency — particularly subtle ones like leadership polish or situational judgment — cannot be accomplished overnight, no matter how strong the coachee’s buy-in and determination to succeed. To become natural and habitual, any leadership strength must be identified, prioritized, practiced, fine-tuned and then practiced some more. While the coaching process does not require indefinite formal coaching to plan, the coachee must sense that support will be available when and as needed, and that she or he enjoys a lasting, trusting relationship, not just a time-limited consulting engagement.

My own longest coaching relationship dates back to 1981. This MIT and Harvard Law School-educated superkeeper has long since reached the top, become a solid rainmaker,

rotated through firm governance, made his mark in his community and been active in local bar activities. Yet he still calls when thorny political situations arise, because he knows that I possess the long view of him and his career — and because he knows that I care about him. He calls our contacts “Am-I-crazy-or-what? counseling.” “I still have the basic mindset of an engineer,” he says, “and sometimes people still mystify me. I’m 62 now. Is it still important to me to have an objective, sympathetic outside sounding board? You bet it is.” ♦

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