

# AMERICAN LAWYER

## **Learning To Lead: How a Law Firm Learned to Train Its Leaders**

**By Douglas B. Richardson and Douglas P. Coopersmith  
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When it comes to identifying and developing top leadership talent, law firms are way behind the curve. In a survey of large law firms conducted with the research arm of *The American Lawyer's* parent company, only 20 percent of respondents said they have formal leadership development programs. That's a dismal result, given the prevalence of such programs in other professions.

Changing times create a demand for more sophisticated leadership styles and skills. Law has become a big, high-stakes business, dominated by firms that increasingly resemble large corporations. Today it is common for a firm to have as many as 20 far-flung offices, up to 40 practice groups and scores of industry teams. The leadership challenges of such an enterprise are far different from the informal, consensus-based management style of the past. Today's top firms have complex organizational charts and operational systems, topped by C-level executives who are judged more on their ability to boost the productivity of others than on personal performance as big producers. Up-and-coming practice group leaders and business developers will have to show that they can build high-performing teams -- a role for which few were trained in law school.

As a result, many firms are taking a serious look at leadership development programs, although they often don't fully understand what it takes to develop a truly effective one. Leadership is about relationships, and lawyers are often dismissive of such "soft skills" as self-awareness and empathy and of the importance of maintaining effective relationships. These skeptics need to be convinced that a leadership program will build hands-on skills that produce immediate benefits: greater market share, better productivity, higher profits, greater retention and more recruiting success.

The effectiveness of corporate leadership programs has long been proven, but much corporate leadership wisdom translates poorly into

law firm settings. It's meant for salaried employees edging their way up a hierarchy, not people over whom the leader has limited formal authority. The legal profession must develop its own leadership development practices. And it should ask what will work, not what has worked.

In 2006 and 2007, [Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney](#) retained [Altman Weil](#) to help develop an ongoing, self-sustaining leadership development program. After reviewing other firms' efforts, corporate leadership programs, university-based programs and external vendors' offerings, we rejected both short-term, off-site, full-immersion programs and "cafeteria" programs of seminars focusing mainly on leadership theory. Participants, generally, found the former to be of limited practical value and that the latter produced only marginal gains in on-the-job judgment and skills.

Instead, Altman Weil recommended that Buchanan Ingersoll develop an in-house program that would emphasize hands-on experience with real-life, real-time challenges and projects. Although it assisted Buchanan Ingersoll with program design and content, Altman urged against completely delegating the program's implementation and management to outsiders. (Buchanan's program is now run by an experienced in-house administrator.) To position the leadership program as a unique resource, we recommended that all leadership program activity be clearly distinguished from the general professional development support the firm provides to all its lawyers.

Buchanan Ingersoll launched the program with a beta test in 2007, involving 15 participants from seven offices. It was a diverse group of participants, including practice group leaders, experienced lawyers poised to move into management, lawyers from two firms that recently merged into Buchanan Ingersoll, several younger lawyers and one nonlawyer recently promoted into firm administration. Historically, leadership training at firms has been targeted toward partners, most often rainmakers. While Buchanan Ingersoll's program targets high-potential partners, leadership skills development can produce startling performance and maturity gains at the senior associate level, or even before. (Buchanan Ingersoll's 2008 leadership program includes a promising senior associate.)

Each participant was assigned an individual leadership coach; all of the 15 coaches in the beta test were former practicing lawyers, professional coaches or legal consultants. Each was also assigned a "senior adviser," an experienced firm lawyer who collaborates with the

participant and the coach in identifying on-the-job leadership challenges and projects. These could include such things as committee work, improvement in business development skills or increased activity in recruiting, diversity or associate development initiatives.

Coming into the program, participants were individually assessed to identify their leadership styles, aptitudes, strengths and development needs. With their coaches, participants then prepared individual development plans detailing specific leadership objectives and skills to be practiced and mastered. This plan is the keystone for objective-setting, coaching and feedback from the firm. While the content of individual assessment and coaching is kept confidential, the plan itself is not: It is shared with the firm and the senior adviser, as the basis of support and feedback.

We can't stress strongly enough how important this plan is. It serves as a crucial tool for directing learning and measuring progress. For participants and coaches, it is both a short-term road map and a basis for continuing leadership planning and development, long after the leadership development program is over.

The participants' real-life, hands-on leadership projects were supplemented by workshops on such topics as firm economics and operations, marketing and business development, practice and performance management and trends in the legal profession. But most of the yearlong program involved the participant, coach and senior adviser regularly discussing leadership tactics, techniques, opportunities and progress.

Buchanan Ingersoll did not set specific achievement measurements, such as increases in new clients or revenue generation, for participants in the program. After the first class completed the program, Buchanan Ingersoll's management confirmed that, as anticipated, the program helped participants examine their own leadership skills, learn core leadership and business economics principles and improve their interpersonal skills.

There was an unexpected networking benefit too, as participants from various practices and offices formed personal bonds and developed new channels for communication.

Additionally, the firm discovered that the program quickly identified those who did not have leadership abilities or necessary interest in

assuming leadership responsibility. This information was useful, both to the firm and the participants.

To its developers, the first year of the program revealed two axioms critical to the success of any leadership initiative involving lawyers:

***Show strong commitment.*** To be seen as credible, leadership development programs must enjoy a strong top-down commitment, in sponsorship, time and money. They should be positioned as very desirable opportunities provided to high-potential talent. Management must understand that large programs are logistically demanding and potentially expensive, particularly if participants from different offices are involved. Successful programs must have competent, dedicated internal administrators. They do not run themselves and cannot be delegated to junior partners, paralegals or administrative assistants.

***Choose the players carefully.*** Participant selection must reflect a clear commitment to fairness and diversity. Likewise, outside coaches should be vetted carefully. Finding coaches familiar with law firm life who are capable of standing up to partners is a major challenge. Also, in pairing participants with coaches and senior advisers, pay attention to getting a good fit and optimizing trust.

Don't be discouraged if some participants do not succeed. There are bound to be varying levels of commitment, pace and performance, so some washouts are to be expected -- and even desired. They just may serve to emphasize that the program is a serious undertaking and not just a beauty contest.

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