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FEATURE

Leadership in Law Firms: Looking Forward A Roundtable Discussion of Professional Development Consortium Members (PDC)

 Moderated by [Jennifer Bluestein](#)

As the legal industry faces challenges unseen in modern law firms, the need for superior leadership is recognized as mission-critical. Firms across the country have, in the past two decades, started focusing on talent management, leadership succession and competencies in a very focused way. The Professional Development Consortium, the PDC (www.pdclegal.org) is an outgrowth of those industry changes and is comprised of attorney professional development managers and directors from law firms across North America. This article is a virtual roundtable of some of the leading professional development experts in law firms of various sizes and discusses whether leadership is more important in law firms and how firms are responding to those needs.

Many thanks to the members of this roundtable:

- **Marni Becker-Avin**, Professional Development Director, Becker & Pollakoff
- **Melody Burton**, Director of Professional Development, DLA LLP(US)
- **Paul Giangola**, Manager of Professional Development, Chadbourne & Parke LLP
- **Susan Manch**, former principal in Shannon & Manch and current Firmwide Director of Learning & Development at Bingham McCutchen LLP
- **Stephanie K. Ryan**, Manager, Attorney Training & Professional Development, McGuire Woods LLP
- **Amy Sladczyk Hancock**, Director of Professional Development, Andrews Kurth, and former Board member of the PDC
- **Susan S. Wagner**, Of Counsel and Director of Professional Development Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, and former Board member of the PDC
- **Scott Westfahl**, Director of Attorney Professional Development at Goodwin Procter and former Chair of the PDC,

Moderator:

- **Jennifer Bluestein**, Director of Attorney Professional Development, Greenberg Traurig LLP, and Chair of the PDC.

Bluestein: Ok, Virtual panelists, we are here to talk about leadership in law firms: how important is it and how are firms addressing those needs? Let's start with Susan Manch, who joined Bingham McCutcheon, one of her clients, after a very successful consulting career advising law firms on leadership and strategy issues. Sue, how critical is leadership to law firms now?

Manch: The marketplace is demanding more and better leaders, capable of gaining true followership within their firms and among their clients. When firms were doing well and dominating the client/firm relationship paradigm, firm leaders could get by with administrative skills and good communication skills. Today, leaders need to be able to motivate people to do the hard stuff--innovate, manage change, build new practices, and deliver services in new ways and with fewer resources. It means that firms with highly effective leaders who can engage lawyers and staff in doing these things will have a competitive advantage over firms with average leaders.

Wagner: I agree. We are being challenged now more than ever to do more with less. Our practice group, office, and firm leaders continually reexamine the status quo and help us navigate changes. But leadership is just as important for our attorneys who don't have a title. Their mentoring, feedback, and team leadership are critical for accelerating our associates' development of skills, managing client teams effectively and efficiently, and keeping our attorneys and staff highly engaged.

Giangola: Being likeable and working hard no longer guarantees a successful career path for a junior lawyer. Likewise, partners in many firms have become "free agents," moving themselves and their portable business from firm to firm, evidencing that the traditional notions of partner loyalty have also changed. Lateral partner movement has caused severe cultural shifts in law firms, regardless of how well (or not) the integration process is handled by firm administration and partnerships. These changes have called into question the entire traditional Big Law model. As a result, strong business-minded leaders who communicate effectively, understand the need for strategic growth, and have the ability to navigate the firm through the current economic climate without sacrificing lawyer AND staff morale, have never been more important.

Sladczyk Hancock: Law firms need solid leaders they can trust and count on as we continue to ride out these uncertain times and adjust to what several people are calling our "new normal" legal environment. Additionally, succession planning within law firms is discussed and focused on now more than ever before and it can't be accomplished inside its own vacuum, independent from solid firm leadership and foresight.

Bluestein: So it sounds like we have agreement that leadership skills are essential. What are your respective firms doing to help cultivate leadership in your organizations?

Ryan: At McGuire Woods, leadership training programs for partners have been a part of our curriculum for the past six years. When initially starting this program series, we utilized universities to provide "up and coming" leaders with a "mini-MBA" style program. The new normal in the legal industry and the need for leadership at all levels brought the realization that having academics train our partners on leadership skills was not the most effective way to get partners to promptly improve their leadership skills and methods. We revamped our leadership program this year utilizing proven firm leadership as speakers and encouraging open/candid discussion between the partners to provide real life guidance and instant access to leadership mentors for our attorneys. In addition, we added a new program to the curriculum for newly promoted partners. This half-day program gives the newest additions to our partner ranks training on the skills needed to transition into a leadership role. The newly designed programs have been extremely well received. We also plan to add additional management and leadership training courses into the curriculum for associates in the near future.

Westfahl: Goodwin Procter has been on the cutting edge of working with Harvard Business School scholars whose expertise is leadership in professional services firms. Partners in leadership roles and senior administrators attend the HBS Leading Professional Services Firms one-week program every year to help them more successfully lead their practices and departments. Additionally, for the past 7 years, we have worked with HBS to design and provide customized, leadership-related programs for our attorneys as they reach critical career milestones, e.g., the transition from junior to mid-level associate; mid-level to senior associate; and to being a partner. These multi-day, offsite programs combine HBS cases, interactive components, assessments and Goodwin-oriented content to help our attorneys successfully navigate transitions to more responsibility and leadership.

Burton: DLA Piper has developed programs that align with our competency-based model and bring attorneys together for targeted training and developmental support. In the spring of 2011, the Professional Development Department launched DLA Piper's Management and Leadership Academies which target mid-level and senior associates and provide relevant skills and knowledge to support our associates at key stages in their career. The intensive, multi-day off-site programs are limited to 30 practice group nominated associates from across all practice groups and offices. Each Academy explores leadership and management principles, business development, presentation skills and legal project management.

Our annual DLA Piper Harvard Leadership Program targets partners and firm leaders at the international level. The intensive week-long Program includes custom case studies and emphasizes the importance of leadership; alignment; strategy implementation; the processes of recruiting, developing, and retaining star professionals; and maintaining a strong culture.

Wagner: We are offering leadership programs for attorneys at all levels. This begins at orientation with a panel discussion about working with secretaries and paralegals. For all attorneys, we present programs by videoconference on leading teams, providing feedback, and project management. This year we also offered a 2-day leadership workshop for senior associates.

For firm leadership, we have conducted two leadership academies that focused principally on change management. We invited titled firm leaders. The titles ranged from chairs of local office committees all the way up to C-level. To prepare for the academies, the participants each outlined an initiative relating to their positions. The academies began and ended with a retreat that included presentations on change management and discussion of the participants' initiatives. Between the two retreats, we conducted small-group facilitated discussions, where the participants could share successes and frustrations with their initiatives.

Bluestein: Are these programs only for the larger firms?

Becker-Avin: Definitely not, at our firm, which consists of 150 attorneys in 15 offices, we have developed a program called Leadership BP, which is patterned after the multiple community leadership programs such as Leadership Miami. It teaches the business side of law, and is our way of developing the future leaders of the Firm. These emerging leaders, who are from different offices and practice groups, were chosen through a very selective submission process. Some of the items on the agenda for the "Class of 2012" include meeting with each member of the Management Committee and all the Department Heads, visiting every office, attending the World Business Forum in NY, watching and giving presentations on a series of Leadership videos from Stanford. It also includes completing a group project of their choosing related to the future of the Firm. The goal is to immerse them in our firm culture, finances, clients, practice areas for a 360 degree view of the firm and to learn what it means to run a law practice. Investing in such programs, and preparing the next generation of leaders to take over the helm, underscores that the future is important to the Firm, which in turn creates stability.

Sladczyk Hancock: Andrews Kurth has roughly 400 attorneys and we have these programs as well. We have included components of leadership-skills training in all levels of our attorney training programs, since the formalization of our Attorney Professional Development program and department when I joined the firm in 2006. Examples of our training programs that include leadership skills development elements span from a new partner one-day orientation to multi-day training programs for brand new and summer associates. This year our new associates will participate in an intensive and highly-interactive business skills immersion program in conjunction with the Fullbridge Program, which was co-founded by Harvard MBA's, with the goal of teaching our new attorneys many critical leadership skills that include decision and forward-thinking abilities, project delegation and management, effective team contribution and resource utilization and successful time management. We are also excited to hold an inaugural training program in the spring for our mid-level attorneys that will include similar leadership modules as well as ones on large team and project management, mentorship, effective client and interpersonal communications and effectively giving, receiving and utilizing real-time feedback.

Bluestein: Thank you all for your insights and sharing. The firms that will remain strong will undoubtedly be those which take leadership training and development very seriously.

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