PD VITAL TO THE NEW WAY FORWARD
Insights from Five Managing Partners

BY AMY SLADCYK HANCOCK

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Law firm managing partners had to make many tough decisions in 2009, and they learned a lot of lessons along the way. During a plenary session at the recent Professional Development Institute sponsored by NALP and ALI-ABA in collaboration with the Professional Development Consortium, five managing partners shared some of their insights from the past year. What was the key take-away from this impressive program? It was that competitive advantage in the new economy will depend entirely on having better trained lawyers who have been trained more efficiently and more quickly, and that PD departments and professionals are vital to helping law firms establish that advantage.

The discussion was moderated by Barbara Miller of Barbara Miller Communications, and included managing partners Bob Jewell of Andrews Kurth, Mark Evans of Bracewell Guilliani, Mike Nannes of Dickstein Shapiro, Mark Wasserman of Sutherland Asbill, and Susan Brewer of Steptoe Johnson. Miller led the group through a series of questions about the industry and their own law firms’ responses to the economic crisis, and panel members shared candidly about their challenges and their hopes for the future.

What was the strongest client demand partners faced during the past year?
There was no lack of consensus on this question: clients want predictability, both in cost and in outcome, and while clients say they want to explore alternative fee arrangements, what they are really interested in negotiating is fee discounts. According to the managing partners on the panel, clients were seen this past year to be very supportive of the move away from lockstep, in large measure because they see greater efficiency in the delivery of legal services in a levels-based system, and they understand this will contribute to lower overall legal fees.

Have cost-cutting measures eroded PD and training efforts during the recession?
Panelists agreed that the temptation to cut back on training costs and training staff had been great, but they also agreed that cutting back on training initiatives at this moment in history would be terribly short-sighted. Most of the firms represented on the panel, however, did find ways to bring costs down without compromising overall training and professional development goals. Choosing videoconferencing over live meetings when feasible was one example. The firms also sought to communicate clearly to clients that all of their firms’ training efforts were focused on creating benefits for the client. Firms focused above all on team-building during the past year, often involving clients themselves in those training efforts. They also focused on teaching client relationship skills, and cultivating in young lawyers a mindset to tend to the needs of the client above all else.

How are law firms using their PD departments more strategically?
In the competency-based promotion systems that are emerging as the new norm, these partners agreed that PD professionals play many key roles, from implementing work assignments and work tracking and monitoring systems to evaluations, team-building, and coaching. PD professionals are being asked to engage more intensively with young lawyers, particularly in their first three years of practice, key years in learning to develop a client-service mindset. But partner training and coaching, too, are becoming increasingly important to law firm success, and PD professionals are expected to have an impact on lawyers throughout their careers at law firms. In addition, PD departments are increasingly being asked to work with other departments within the law firm, including recruiting, marketing, diversity, and knowledge management. One panelist noted that the ability to access and digest information quickly is the single most important skill a lawyer can have going forward – more important even that critical thinking. Finally, PD professionals are being asked to take a hand in helping young lawyers understand the business model of the law firm itself.
And what will the law firm of the future look like?
These partners foresee a business model with several different categories of lawyers where some work on more routine matters — matters that can be commoditized and in some cases even pulled out as separate business units — and others work on more specialized matters. The panelists agreed that the traditional leverage model of recent years is probably gone for good, and agreed also that staffing models are likely to continue to change and be in flux for some time to come. Compensation models, too, are likely to continue to change, and few on the panel felt that the annual bonus model of the past could be reconciled with the current set of client demands that are driving law firms. In general, they felt that all law firms will need more data about the real costs of the delivery of legal services so that they can continue to create greater efficiencies.

And finally, this group of partners expressed hope that their PD professionals would continue to be creative and innovative and willing to bring bold new ideas to management to help the firm realize every possible strategic advantage.

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NEWCOMER’S CORNER

ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ASSOCIATES

BY ANNA FRIESEN HAHN

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As with any good relationship, strong relationships with your firm’s associates are built on mutual trust and understanding. Great, you say. So, how do I get there? Establishing relationships — good relationships — takes time and effort. Keep in mind that these individuals are, in most cases, young, talented, intelligent overachievers who’ve just accomplished a major goal of landing the “Big Firm” job, and they want to be treated as such. Here are a few pointers to set you on your way:

• Treat them as you’d like to be treated. A good general rule is to give every lawyer (and staff person for that matter) the same amount of respect, from the most senior partner down to the first-year associate. Don’t make distinctions between junior and senior lawyers when it comes to your attention. Your professionalism will be appreciated at both ends of the spectrum.

• The recruiting possibilities are endless — take advantage of them! I love to involve associates in the recruiting process. It’s never too early to get them involved. Summer associates often find new attorneys to be the easiest group to relate to — being the group that is most closely removed from the summer program themselves. Let new attorneys be your eyes and ears on the practice floors and, more importantly, let them know you’re relying on their help.

• Be involved in associate firm life. Don’t be a stranger. Step into their offices when appropriate and find out what’s going on in their lives. Does your firm have an Associates’ Committee? Offer to organize meetings, assist in planning end-of-year dinners and social outings, or help with the annual election process. They’ll come to depend on you for support.

• Remember your pipeline! This year’s summer associates will be next year’s associate attorneys. Laying the foundation for a healthy relationship during the summer program will give you a head start on building a strong and lasting connection with your future associates.

This may all seem like common sense, but establishing yourself as a trusted source of information and assistance to your associate pool can pay big dividends down the road. If you stay at the same place long enough, you may even have the opportunity to see your summer associates become partners, and, ultimately, the leaders of your firm, which I’m sure most seasoned recruiters will agree is a very rewarding experience indeed.

Newcomer’s Corner is a forum for NALP’s newest members and those new to the profession to share helpful information with other newcomers. To learn about the Newer Professionals Section, visit www.nalp.org.