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# Why Law Firms Should Spend Time Investing in Their Talent

Stephen Seckler and David Rosenblatt

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## Summary

- ❑ Law firms can create a more supportive, engaging, and innovative environment by shifting the focus from individual achievements to collective success.
- ❑ Retaining talent is crucial for the health of your firm, but there are many other reasons to invest in your talent.
- ❑ Learn about some of the initiatives to consider that should help rising talent become better lawyers, better leaders, and more deeply invested in their firm's success.



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*"The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership"*

**Harvey S. Firestone**

*"What gets measured gets done"*

**Peter Drucker (and others)**

In [15 Tips for Leadership Success](#) (Law Practice Today, January 2023), we discussed the most important attributes of a good law firm leader and the skills necessary to be effective in a leadership role. In this article, we would like to expand upon the definition of who is a leader in a law firm and focus on the first tip—*The Leader is Responsible for Everyone Else's Success*.

## It's No Longer Just About *the Partners and Their Own Clients*

As lawyers, we like our autonomy. One of the attractive things about practicing law is that we get to advise clients based on our own professional judgment. Of course, we work with teams on matters, and we seek out input from other professionals in our networks. We don't practice in a vacuum.

But fundamentally, we are individual contributors.

Leadership, on the other hand, is not about your individual contributions. It's about your colleagues and what they are doing to serve the firm's clients.

Put another way, if you want to be a successful leader in your law firm, you need to shift your mindset. Your own clients need your legal acumen, your advocacy, and your ability to solve their problems.

As a leader, your focus must shift to ensuring that your colleagues are delivering the best legal services that *they* can deliver.

This requires a concerted investment of *your* time in *their* success.

## Law Firm “Leaders” are not just Managing Partners and Practice Group Chairs

In a law firm environment, it's easy to think that leadership is just the job of the managing partner (or



the practice group chairs).

In reality, leadership in a law firm extends beyond designated titles. In some sense, any partner or associate can serve as a “leader” if they are in a position to help other attorneys, paralegals, or support staff to be more successful. True leadership manifests in every lawyer's capacity to mentor, guide, and positively influence their colleagues.

This broader definition of leadership fosters a culture of shared success and collective growth, crucial for the firm's overall progress and adaptation to the practice of law as it evolves.

## Retaining Talent is Crucial for the Health of Your Firm, But There Are Many Other Reasons to Invest in Your Talent

There are many opportunities for law firm leaders throughout the firm to invest in their talent. Before we delve into the ways that law firm leaders can help ensure everyone else's success, it is important to understand why making this investment is so crucial to the success of your firm.

Firms that invest in training and development are more likely to retain top talent. This in turn reduces the costs and disruptions associated with turnover. When associates and partners leave, there are often lost billable hours during the transition and your firm may end up paying substantial fees to a recruiter.

Clients are generally not happy when there is turnover and in the worst-case scenario, good clients follow their lawyers to other firms.

There are other reasons why your investment in professional development at your firm is so important:

- 1 Client Satisfaction:** Well-trained lawyers are better equipped to provide superior service, leading to higher client satisfaction and loyalty.
- 2 Future Leadership:** Developing talent from within builds a pipeline of future leaders who understand the firm's culture and values.
- 3 Risk Management:** Proper training minimizes the risk of malpractice and ethical breaches, protecting the firm's reputation and bottom line.
- 4 Financial Growth:** Firms that invest in their people often see a return in the form of increased billable hours and expanded client relationships. Firms that take the time to teach business development skills to their associates are more likely to end up with a pool of senior associates who not only understand how to do the work, but how to generate the work.
- 5 Adapting to Change:** With rapid technological advancements, emerging practice areas, and shifts in the way law is practiced, ongoing training ensures that the firm remains competitive and at the cutting edge. The explosion of AI will cause radical changes in the delivery of legal services. Your lawyers need to understand how to use it ethically.



- 6 **Employee Engagement:** Staff and attorneys who feel the firm is investing in their growth are more likely to be engaged and motivated.
- 7 **Firm Reputation:** A commitment to training and development enhances the firm's reputation in the industry, attracting both top talent and discerning clients.

### **Training is a Good Starting Point But Your Investment Should Go Much Further**

Despite the evolution of legal education at most law schools, law students are still graduating with a skills gap. While law school teaches lawyers how to think like a lawyer, it doesn't provide as much of the practical training that is necessary to actually represent clients.

Many law school graduates are also lacking some of the soft skills that are necessary to be successful in practice (time management; building strong relationships with clients, colleagues, and other professionals; networking; active listening; empathy, etc.)

If your firm is small, internal training may not be practical. Outside CLE can fill in the gap.

However, there are many ways to invest beyond formal training.

Here are some of the initiatives to consider that should help rising talent become better lawyers, better leaders, and more deeply invested in their firm's success:

- 1 **Sharing financial information and offering in-house seminars on law firm economics:** Law is a profession. But it is also a business. While not every lawyer needs to understand every nuance of the business, if associates want to advance to partnership and leadership roles within the firm, they need to understand how the firm makes money.
- 2 **Encourage younger lawyers to serve on impactful firm-wide committees:** Serving on firm committees is a great way for younger lawyers to better understand the business of law. Associates can offer valuable input on committees involving professional development, DEI, recruiting, pro bono work, technology, marketing, and business development. By having associates participate in these committees, you are preparing the next generation for leadership.
- 3 **Organize and encourage participation in community events and social action causes:** Community involvement is a great way for associates to build relationships that may eventually lead to business. When your associates participate in social action, you also elevate the profile of the firm and brand it as a law firm that cares about the community. Millennials are the most socially conscious generation in today's workforce. They will derive more professional satisfaction from being affiliated with a firm that values and commits to social action.
- 4 **Enable younger litigation lawyers to get more hands-on litigation earlier in their careers with depositions, court appearances, and trials:** If your firm does litigation, getting younger lawyers involved earlier in depositions and court appearances will help build the skills these lawyers will need to be successful advocates. In addition, they will derive more meaning from their work.



- 5 **Allow business lawyers to do more than due diligence and schedules in deals:** If your firm does corporate or real estate transactions, find ways to get your associates to do more than just due diligence. Encourage associates to sit in on negotiating sessions and client calls and write down their time for professional development.
- 6 **If you have professional development personnel, get them to prepare specific practice group skills checklists to review with each associate and junior partner:** This ensures that lawyers are advancing skill and experience-wise.
- 7 **Invest in certain specific technology based on the recommendations and experience of younger lawyers and staff:** Younger lawyers are often more tech-savvy than the partners in your firm. Leverage their knowledge to deliver legal services better, faster, and cheaper.
- 8 **Offer meaningful pro bono opportunities with appropriate billable hours target against year-end target:** Pro bono work often gives associates the opportunity to take much more ownership over their work product and build their skills faster.
- 9 **Be mindful of and try to diminish the new partner's "financial cliff" when new partners may be slightly (or more) worse off in the first few years of the partnership due to new tax obligations, capital pay-in, lesser direct pay benefits, and being paid through a draw during the year instead of salary:** This may require compensating new partners at a higher initial level to cover these new expenses and methods of compensation.
- 10 **Support some form of hybrid work arrangement but emphasize that coming into the firm for at least the majority of the week is critical to learning and teaching skills necessary to be successful:** This message must be communicated to lawyers at all levels, the mentees, and the mentors.

## The Billable Hour Presents a Structural Challenge for Firms of All Sizes

The emphasis on billable hours at most firms makes it hard for lawyers to take time out to make these investments. It really requires a shift in mindset. Firms that take the longer view are better positioned for future success. At law firms, time is generally considered billable and "non-billable". This devalues anything other than direct client work.

Firms should explicitly measure and reward time spent on training, mentoring, pro bono, firm administration, and marketing. This is true for associates consuming the training as well as partners providing the training and mentoring. Separate file numbers should be opened for these various activities.

## Good Law Firm Leaders are Also Coaches

Coaching also plays a pivotal role in the training and development landscape, especially within the context of law firms. While a well-run firm ensures that associates are receiving proper training,



partners and senior associates can also play an important role in coaching associates and partners to integrate the skills they learn in more formal workshops.

There are several benefits to the firm when partners and senior associates act as coaches:

- 1 Personalized Development:** Unlike general training, coaching is tailored to individual needs, addressing specific areas for growth, and maximizing an attorney's potential.
- 2 Career Paths:** Partners can help lawyers identify and navigate their desired career paths, ensuring they stay motivated and aligned with the firm's goals.
- 3 Skill Enhancement:** Beyond legal knowledge, partners can work on enhancing soft skills such as communication, leadership, and client relations—critical for a lawyer's success.
- 4 Accountability:** Partners/coaches ensure that lawyers stay accountable for their personal and professional growth, leading to consistent improvement.
- 5 Conflict Resolution:** Partners can guide attorneys through interpersonal challenges, facilitating better teamwork and firm cohesion.
- 6 Emotional Intelligence:** Partners/coaches can work with lawyers to develop emotional intelligence, a vital aspect of client interactions, team dynamics, and leadership.

For more on coaching see [How Coaching Picks Up Where Training and Consulting Leave Off](#) [Stephen Seckler's recent article in the GPSolo eReport].

## Conclusion

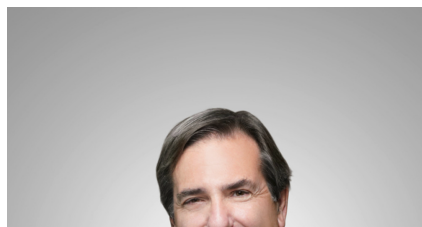
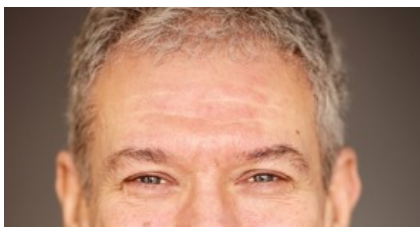
Law firms can create a more supportive, engaging, and innovative environment by shifting the focus from individual achievements to collective success.

This approach not only enhances client satisfaction and operational efficiency but also prepares the firm to navigate the complexities of the legal industry as it continues to evolve. It also decreases costly turnover.

Doing great legal work for your clients is important. But it is insufficient. Investing in talent and valuing contributions beyond billable hours are the keys to building a sustainable and thriving law practice. If every partner and senior associate in your firm adopts this philosophy, your firm will continue to thrive long into the future.

## Authors

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## Stephen Seckler

Stephen E. Seckler, Esq. is President of Seckler Attorney Coaching. He is an attorney with 25+ years of experience in coaching lawyers on marketing, career advancement, and leadership. He has helped 100's of attorney to...

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## David Rosenblatt

David P. Rosenblatt, Esq. (drosenblatt@burnslev.com) is a practicing attorney and the former managing partner of Burns & Levinson, LLP, a 125-attorney firm based in Boston. He was one of the longest-serving managing...

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