

Law Firms Shouldn't Overlook **Value of Soft Skills**

Soft skills do not get much attention in law firms. That was my experience when I was practicing in small, medium and larger firms, and it still is the case today.

Law firms are focused on leveraging, billable hours, business development and profits per partner. I am often informed by practitioners that “time in law firms is far too precious to prioritize attention to things like soft skills ... whatever those are.”

Soft skills also are not taught in law schools. The hard skills of strong legal analysis, proficient statutory construction, effective legal writing and persuasive legal argument get priority to produce “practice ready” lawyers, or so the theory goes. Ever-increasing and evolving substantive law puts pressure on law schools to teach what is tested on bar exams, and pass rates matter a lot to law school administrators.

Even hard skills can get short shrift in that kind of competitive academic environment. When I was a teaching fellow at a Top 15 law school, there was barely enough time to adequately address effective legal writing, a vital and necessary hard skill. And the competition for teaching time in law schools was a lot less pronounced then than it is today.

With that in mind, it may surprise many lawyers to discover that 80 percent of success in business is determined by soft skills. So, it would seem that ignoring soft skills is risky business.

In this age of technology, when young lawyers are clinging to cellphones with death grips, texting people across rooms and preferring email to face-to-face conversation, ignoring soft skills training is like refusing water to a choking friend. It just does not make sense, and it will end badly.

Soft skills are simple. They are the things that draw clients to legal service providers and the things that improve work products—both strong bottom-line objectives for legal employers.

Soft skills include things such as communicating effectively, finding mentors and sponsors, understanding office politics and procedures, accepting feedback and using it to improve work product, networking and developing new work, negotiating successfully, being comfortable with collaboration and teamwork, being a creative thinker, and being able to adapt to a variety of tasks and work settings.

To develop soft skills in young lawyers, law firm leaders need to encourage associates to get out of their offices, interact with colleagues on a personal level, go to firm social events and take advantage of career development opportunities. Sitting in offices and staring at computers all day will not turn associates into client development assets and will not produce future leaders.

But that's not all. Consider the trend in large law firms today for senior associates to "manage" more junior lawyers.

I hear about this management concept a lot from young lawyers I consult with, and also from law firm managers trying to maximize profits. The young lawyers either love it because they are able to flex their muscles as "managers" or hate it because they are being "managed" by the muscle flexers, who are barely senior to them in experience.

The firm managers love it because it takes management responsibilities away from senior lawyers and does not affect valuable billable time. Those managers, however, fail to consider the possibility that these management schemes can be accidents waiting to happen in the absence of soft skills. Effective management requires skills like presenting feedback in a helpful and sensitive manner, being empathetic, not taking yourself too seriously and functioning effectively as a member of a team. All of these are soft skills, and associate "managers" do not get these skills by osmosis.

And yet they are "managing" young lawyers, fresh out of law school and new to the firm. These "newbie" lawyers, who typically are nervous and apprehensive in their first months and years of practice, need guidance and encouragement. Fundamentally, they need people to talk to them and treat them like they have value and are not invisible.

How effective can the untrained associate "manager" be in helping newbie lawyers adjust to the law firm setting? How effective can the untrained

associate “manager” be in motivating and teaching newbie lawyers? How much do these novice “managers” care about the success of those who are poised to become their competitors?

In my day as an associate, partners with years of experience managed associates. It worked well and generally produced confident and competent lawyers. As a result of this experience, I never have been a fan of associates managing other associates. I think it is fraught with problems, and I have seen it go horribly wrong. A little power can become an ugly thing in the hands of the unskilled.

An untrained associate “manager” can make a junior lawyer feel stupid, unworthy and incapable of acceptable work. For that junior lawyer, it becomes shameful to ask for help, shameful to demonstrate vulnerability and shameful not to be perfect.

Too often, the end result is that a new lawyer gets discouraged and loses confidence, and a senior associate never learns real and valuable leadership and management skills. After all, who is going to complain? Who else knows the particulars of the associate “manager” ineptitude? No one except the new lawyer, who never will tell for fear of losing the job. So, it is best to let the untrained senior associates have their power trips outside the office. There is no place in the law firm for an unskilled manager on a high horse, particularly where young careers are at stake.

If elimination of associate “managers” is not possible in your firm, be sure to train the managers in soft skills as early as possible. Insist that they become good leaders and managers, and that their management skills are being critiqued and supervised on a regular basis.

It will be time well spent, and they will do far less harm. That always should be the goal when stewarding young lawyers.

Below is a list of soft skills that I consider most important to the success of young lawyers:

1. Being a good communicator in a variety of modes, not just email and text messaging.
2. Being empathetic and developing strong emotional intelligence.
3. Having a sense of humor and not taking yourself too seriously.

4. Finding mentors and sponsors to enhance career development.
5. Understanding office politics and procedures.
6. Having the ability to accept feedback and use it positively to improve work product.
7. Networking and developing new work.
8. Being adaptable to a variety of tasks and work settings.
9. Being assertive in the desire to learn about the business end of the law firm.
10. Being comfortable with collaboration and teamwork.
11. Being a creative thinker.
12. Developing leadership and management skills.
13. Developing negotiations skills.

Taking soft skills seriously will increase the value of young lawyers and their ability to manage others. It is a win-win for young lawyers, law firms and the law profession.

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