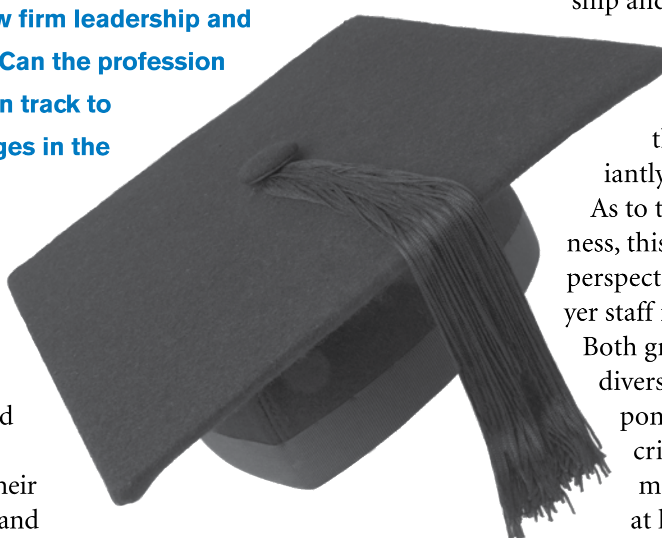
Leadership Education: What's Needed and Why

BY RICHARD POTTER

Looking back over a career in both law and practice management, I am struck by the fact that the highlights have been marked by examples of something that may be in short supply today—excellence in law firm leadership and institutional support for it. Can the profession put leadership education on track to keep pace with other changes in the legal services sector?



In the world of general business publishing, forests are consumed in explaining and extolling leadership "best practices" from countless angles: having a vision and a strategy, motivating others, understanding markets and their shifts, incubating innovation and so on … the list is long. But for those who want to better understand the leadership skills that are peculiar to the legal services sector, the resources are thin.

Has the profession ceded the field of leadership education to the general business authors? Not exactly—but our perspective on leadership is highly fragmented. We learn what we can from bar associations and licensing bodies, occasional law school curriculum add-ons, for-profit CLE programs, and an array of organizations existing primarily to serve nonlawyers (such as the Association of Legal Administrators, the Legal Marketing Association and the Institute of Management and Administration, to name only three). All the existing organizations have an important role to play, but there are still obvious gaps in leadership education in our profession.

It is time to consider why those gaps exist and how to fill them.

Continuity and Comprehensiveness

For me, the two most-needed characteristics in leadership education are continuity and comprehensiveness. The first, continuity, suffers because often voluntary organizations and outside service providers change leadership and visions (sometimes annually) before education programs can be properly tested, evaluated and improved on, even though their efforts are valiantly supported by capable staff.

As to the second issue, comprehensiveness, this refers to the need to integrate the perspectives of both lawyers *and* nonlawyer staff in leadership training programs. Both groups, while their perspectives are diverse, are absolutely essential components of today's law firm and are critical to a leader's success. Yet while many of the training organizations at least tip their hat to the concept of including both groups' perspectives in their programs, the fact is that few are successful at it.

This may be because of the historical development of nonlawyer staff in the legal services sector. Except for accounting and finance staff, nonlawyer personnel in large numbers were relatively rare until fairly recently. Perhaps we are so overcome by other changes in the profession over the past two decades that we overlook the integral role that nonlawyers now play in our firms. Today, they are an essential element in the success or failure of almost every

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firm. Yet law firm organizational structures and, most importantly, our education programs—both for lawyers and staff—often ignore the gaps in function and understanding between the two groups. And that creates serious barriers to high performance.

I have seen numerous examples of senior law firm staff who have little understanding of what it is that lawyers do for clients and why they do it. Equally, most lawyers have a poor grasp of the rationale for the advice they receive from nonlawyer personnel, such as their information services director or finance manager. And then, when a lawyer is asked to assume leadership responsibilities, such as chairing a practice group, the gaps in understanding become very clear and negatively affect what may well be the first leadership role in the lawyer's career. Is it any wonder that group performance suffers given that firm leaders usually have very little education or training to fall back on, in terms of basic business and leadership principles and strategies? Moreover, with such gaps in understanding, should it be a surprise that the staff-lawyer interface lies at the heart of many missteps in carrying out the firm's business plan?

A Shift in Models

So where is law firm leadership education most likely to be carried out successfully—that is, in a way that maximizes the two elements of continuity and comprehensiveness? I believe that goal is most likely to be accomplished at a college or university. And by that I mean any independent, postsecondary institution that understands the interface between professionals and staff in a professional services firm and has the facilities and teachers to prepare leaders on both sides of the interface.

However, I use the words "at a college or university" with this important caveat: Increasingly the education and training sector will be pushed to make maximum use of information technology to deliver its services—not to the exclusion of in-person classroom courses, but rather to deliver parts of the programming much more effectively. And importantly, a strong IT component in delivering programs will allow the educational institutions to better respond to individual needs, filling gaps in understanding specific to each person's role and more effectively bridging the lawyer-staff divide in knowledge as a result.

A must-read is Clayton Christensen's new book *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (McGraw-Hill, 2008). While his main preoccupation is with primary and secondary education, Christensen predicts that specialist education will be the first area in which a new, IT-intensive system will evolve, at the edges of mainstream education. Thus, the legal services sector, which is surely a specialist area, has an opportunity to be at the forefront of this movement.

Although I am advocating for a shift to the college-and-university model here, it also seems clear that all the existing practice management and leadership training organizations can benefit from Christensen's insights as well. The need for better leadership education is so great that any means by which we can gain the benefits of better integration of efforts—among the existing organizations, and between them and the college-and-university model—will add value and enhance performance in law firms. LP

Law-and-Business Hybrid Programs

Few postsecondary educational institutions have ventured into areas devoted to law practice management as a separate field of study, research and teaching. Among those that have, a central question has been whether to offer the program as an adjunct to a law program or to a business program. Here are three programs that use a "hybrid approach," employing variations in full-time, part-time and executive studies and in certificates, diplomas and formal degrees:

- **University of Denver**
  Sturm College of Law
  Master of Science in Legal Administration
  www.law.du.edu/msla
- **Nottingham Trent University**
  MBA in the Management of Legal Practice
  www.ntu.ac.uk/apps/pss/course-cf-60674-3/MBA_Management_of_Legal_Practice.aspx
- **George Washington University** and the Hildebrandt Institute
  Master of Professional Studies in Professional Firm Management
  www.ocp.gwu.edu/lawfirm-md