

Law Firm Leaders Improve Performance Through People - Not Process

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Occasionally, there will be this wonderful "aha!" moment when law firms realize that investing time, training, and resources on developing higher performing practice/team leaders has a compounding effect on results. After all, if by improving their skills as a team leader it affects all of those who report to them, the scalability of the approach is hard to beat. So, why does this not occur as often as it should? Ask a leader for some of the reasons, and this is what you might hear:

"I don't have time for that."

"I am a team leader BECAUSE I am the best lawyer in my practice."

"Spare me your team building speech. I have a practice of my own and need to attend enough meetings already."

"I coach my team every month in our meetings."

The typical law firm team leader spends about 80-90% of their non-billable time on administrative tasks, meetings, and solitary activities. Most spend 10 minutes or less per day coaching their performers. We would like to think that leaders spend their time developing their people, thinking strategically, and making it easier for the team to build their practice. They don't. They may be in charge, but holding a whistle does not make them a coach.

Coaching is not the same as managing. To be a great manager, you optimize processes and tasks. To be a great coach, you increase the potential of one person at a time. Do not confuse learning how to manage a practice/team with how to coach members of that team. An exceptional practice or client team manager can make things run smoothly, but they could be just greasing the wheels of an old car going faster in the wrong direction.

However, an exceptional team leader CAN have massive impact on future results if they spend their time on the right things. Here is what you need to do:

1. Demand team leaders spend 60-70% of their time coaching and developing team members. If they can't, they are wasting their time on other things for a couple reasons: they are avoiding

it through voluntarily doing busy work (admin and meetings) or the firm is wasting their time with demanding silly reports and meetings.

2. [Train leaders how to coach](#). You may say, "They all know how to do that." I do not deny that "coaching" is going on. But, is it good coaching? Effective? Is it making people better? If not, it is not coaching.
3. Admit that the number of "firefighting" incidents a team leader has to deal with is the diagnosis for a need for more coaching time (leader and team member), not an excuse of why there is no time for it.
4. Simulate, collaborate, compete. Team leaders need to use simulated client and prospect events to identify problematic scenarios and performance blind spots to work on with *individuals*. However, they also need to build *teams* that collaborate to allow all members to focus on their strengths. Competition, when managed properly, is how you get the best performance out of both.
5. Hold team leaders accountable. If they will not spend time developing talent because they have a big case or are uncomfortable having critical conversations, offer them a choice. They can start coaching and learning how to unleash the potential of their teams, or they can have an focus of being a great lawyer and individual contributor. Pick one.

Team leaders need to coach PROACTIVELY. It is about people. If you are a team leader that springs into action only when a fire erupts or you get a disappointing result, you are in the wrong role.

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