Where (Practice/Industry Group) Leadership Training Fails

From my observations over the years and from speaking candidly with those professionals within law firms charged with overseeing training and professional development, I hear about how leadership development training, especially for practice and industry group leaders is so vitally important, but how the biggest contributor to wasted training dollars is ineffective methodologies.

When my old friend David Maister and I wrote "*First Among Equals: How to Manage a Group of Professionals*" I checked Amazon, only to discover that there were already over 920,000 books listed under "Leadership" and conclude that all the world needed was one more. But that said, if we look closely at these various Leadership books, one can quickly discern that most are written from a top-down corporate prospective and don't often line up with our professional services reality. So, if we are not providing our people with training that fits with their real-world situations, we are sunk before we begin.

And to be very specific, here are five distinct shortcomings I hear about and personally observe where I have to conclude that leadership training is an unfortunate waste of money:

1. **Training That Is Too Theoretical**

Theoretical or inspirational training approaches are where the rubber meets the sky!

For example, you will likely be told about how a leader is distinguished by "**having followers.**" Right? So for my part, I will ask a group of practice and industry group leaders, "*Show of hands, how many of you aspire to be . . . followers*?" And they all laugh. They understand completely that in our world, every lawyer feels that they are a leader, and in many ways, they are - especially as they oversee client matters and work with small groups of associates and paralegals to get the client work done.

Then you are likely to be informed about how leaders "**assign tasks**." So as the group's leader your job is to examine the various activities that would advance the group's market success and then decide, from amongst your group members, who should do what particular activity. And I will be outrageous enough to tell these group leaders to please inform me if any of them find that assigning tasks actually works. I inform them that as a "Contributing Editor" with the "*Of Counsel*" newsletter, I will arrange to have one of their journalists come, interview them, interview their team members and that I will endeavor to "*make them famous*" – because while it may seem (theoretically) feasible to get things done by assigning them, I just don't ever witness real world examples of it successfully transpiring. I then inform them that if there is one word that I will work to have them expunge from their vocabulary, it is "assign," because it just does not work. But there are practical ways to get your team members to willingly take on projects and be enthusiastic about actually executing those projects – and that is what effective leadership training should be all about.

Maybe one more example. If you read about good leaders, you have likely been informed that leadership is about "**making decisions**." A recent article title grabbed my attention: "*Ways to Supercharge your Leadership Intuition to make Better Decisions*." And once again, I call BS!

I have had a very blessed career and early on, after stumbling into consulting to law firms, I had a very senior, statesman-like individual, the founder of a major firm, take an interest in me and say to me one day, "*McKenna there is only one thing you need know about working with lawyers*." As I endeavor to always be open to learning, I quickly asked for his guidance. He said, "*Burn this into your brain!*" And over the years, whenever I have had the opportunity to conduct leadership training, I have invited my participants to do the same: Burn this into your brain. He said, "*No lawyer, anywhere, EVER . . . gets excited, enthusiastic, willing supports or gets behind . . . any idea, initiative, change, plan or program . . . that they themselves have not had a PART in formulating! Your job is not to be the smartest in the room. Your job is to be the Coach, the Catalyst, the Facilitator; to help them get from where they are to where they want or need to be*."

And that is what leadership is all about, but you will be hard pressed to find that kind of guidance in most practice and industry group leadership training.

2. Training That Is Not Behavioral Focused

It is not difficult to find all kinds of supposed leadership articles available to the professions that tout the various "*attributes, characteristics and traits of the best leaders*." I have encountered practice leadership trainers asking of their participants to list these various characteristics, only to hear things like: "*the best Leader is . . .*
- *a visionary*
- *adaptive and charismatic*
- *creative and decisive*
- *a strong and committed individual with political clout*
- *independent, humble and self-confident*
- *willing to assume responsibility*
- *an individual who displays personal integrity*
- *an individual with the ability to communicate effectively*

and so forth.

The obvious problem with this kind of (theoretical) listing is the "***How?"*** How do you be creative, self-confident, display integrity or have political clout? In other words, I would strongly argue that leadership is not about difficult to measure labels but really about specific behaviors.

Framed completely differently, the question that I pose to workshop participants is:
"*Think back to an individual that you have worked with either in the practice of law or in some other community, civic or non-profit organization that you have been involved with. Think of an individual that stands out in your mind, as the very best mentor, teacher, leader that you ever had the opportunity of working with. Now tell us all please, what specifically did that person DO, that caused you to perform better than you might otherwise have performed had they not been in the picture?"*

And I seriously invite you to consider what your responses to that question might include. Please notice that this question provokes a behavioral response, provides insights that can be emulated, and gets to the essence of what leaders actually do to be effective, far more than pontificating and theorizing about the various vague traits and characteristics that they supposedly exhibited in some mysterious way!

3. Training That Has No Connection to The Job Responsibilities

Another way of wasting dollars is failing to link training with the Practice or Industry Group Leader's Job Description . . . if there is one in existence.

For many years I have the privilege of conducting a one-day master class for new practice and industry group leaders hosted by The Ark Group. I have now trained well over 400 Leaders in these Workshops and in all cases the participants hail from firms of over 100 attorneys in size including the likes of Jones Day, Kirkland & Ellis, Morgan Lewis, Sidley Austin, Weil Gotshal, Winston & Strawn and so forth. Amongst a number of opening questions I pose to the entire group at the beginning of the day, is to inquire how many of them have a formal written job description. In any given session, out of a group of about 18 participants, I usually get ONLY two to three hands go up. What I don't usually ask, of those who had responded in the affirmative, is to tell us specifically what their job description entails. I've since learned that that would make for the perfect follow-on inquiry.

By way of example, I was engaged by a firm to help them launch and develop a strategic plan for a new industry group as well as help kick-start one group that has clearly not been firing on all cylinders. In my preparatory briefing, I asked (among a number of other questions) the usual one about formal job descriptions. I was informed that indeed job descriptions had just been developed, arising out of a session with all of the practice and industry leaders the month before. I learned that this job description was formulated during an exercise conducted by some consultant in attempting to determine what tasks and activities these leaders should be held responsible for executing. I was assured that I would be sent a copy.

Later that day I received the promised draft job description . . . all four pages of it. Entitled, Group Leader Position Responsibilities, this document covered EVERYTHING – from developing an annual budget to approving marketing expenditures and signing-off on quarterly WIP reports; from coordinating file distribution to overseeing workload management; and from circulating draft agendas in advance of meetings to coordinating the performance reviews of students and associates. It included everything . . . EXCEPT anything to do with leading a team! This was the most exacting laundry list of ***administrative minutiae*** I have ever read through.

My response to the managing partner:
I will be surprised (almost alarmed) if you don't hear from some of your practice and industry group leaders, after having reviewed this job description, that it is a touch "overwhelming." I personally think that the practice leader's job description should be evolutionary in nature, such that you identify a few 'mission critical' tasks that you will absolutely hold people accountable for achieving and then slowly progress to adding more responsibilities.

I would, therefore, if I were drafting this job description, start with what I believe should be your two (and only two) mission critical objectives (which are the highest value use of the leader's time and curiously are not addressed, in any sense, anywhere in this draft):

> *MISSION CRITICAL OBJECTIVE NUMBER ONE:*
> *To invest time in getting to really know the individual members of your team; getting conversant with their strengths and career aspirations; and coaching and helping (one-on-one) each individual member become even more successful then they would have been, had you not been the leader.*
>
> *MISSION CRITICAL OBJECTIVE NUMBER TWO:*
> *To work with your practice group, as a team, to identify and implement specific joint action projects intended to increase the group's overall morale; enhance the visibility of the group in their competitive arena; improve the service and value delivered to clients; secure 'better business'; and work towards developing a dominant position is some targeted niche areas of your marketplace.*

From that as my start, I would then include perhaps one page of only the key, essential items that have been documented over the 4-page attachment, as simply supplemental action points to accomplishing the two mission critical objectives.

And as you read this please note that these two Mission Critical Objectives are **outcome focused** – not activity focused. In other words, they do not suggest or dictate an approach or style, you do it your way. But it should allow any firm leader to easily be able to measure and assess what the results were at the end of the year.

And if you do not have formal, written job descriptions, what do you use as the basis for focusing training to help your practice and industry group leaders execute on their responsibilities?

4. Training That Does Not Address Real-World Issues Participants Are Facing.

Remembering back to my admonishment to "burn this into your brain," I find that no matter what the most senior leaders of a firm believe should be included in any leadership training agenda, if you don't invest the time to query the participants, you are off to a less-than-productive start.

The best approach is to conduct brief personal interviews with a handful of the practice / industry group leaders to get a sense of how long they have been in the position; how much non-billable time they spend in their leadership activities; how their group functions; whether they feel they have sufficient management support; what they may have been tearing their hair out about recently and what specific training agenda topics they would like to see covered in the time made available.

5. Training With No Action Element.

One guaranteed way to have your training fail is to ignore linking the training with any day-to-day leadership behavior. So, if you want to ensure that what happens in the classroom and what happens back on the job are kept worlds apart do not make any effort to have participants make a personal commitment to implement some kind of project or task as a direct result of what they should have learned.

Then you need to make sure that you do not record the participant's names and the specific "deliverable" that they have volunteered to work on and report back to the group. And do not set a date at the precise conclusion of the training session for everyone to get back together to account on their progress.

And finally, do not hold the presenter of the training responsible for coaching or providing assistance to the participants to help ensure that they are successful in executing on their undertaking and thereby feeling like they are making personal progress.

Naturalist William Henry Hudson once observed: "*You cannot fly like an eagle with the wings of a wren*." Along that same theme, I fear that too many leadership training efforts are theoretical, don't address or change behavior, with content that is poorly delivered and without an action element integrated into the firm.

Side-Bar:

Don't Forget Your HiPos
(High Potential Future Leaders)

I had the occasion awhile back, to participate in a brainstorming session with a small group of seasoned managing partners wherein we were attempting to identify what developmental experiences might have the greatest impact on shaping any potential leader. We identified the following:
- having the experience of leading a major substantive client project;
- fixing or stabilizing a floundering project;
- turning around an idea or client deal that fell apart;

- chairing an internal committee, project or task force handing a temporary assignment;
- being mentored by a gifted senior professional with exceptional qualities;
- confronting and coaching a junior professional with an identified performance problem;
- actively engaging in an outside industry, civic or political committee leadership role;
- taking on a new career challenge in response to identifying a specific opportunity;
- taking control of a sensitive personal crisis – serious illness, family breakup, death;
- attending an intensive, interactive leadership skills-building program and then coming back to the firm and delivering portions of the content to others;
- starting a sub-practice - building something from nothing; and
- first time as an assistant group leader, having to manage peers.