

## Your Old Guard is Leaving. Are Your Firm's New Leaders Ready?

by Ida Abbott

How is your firm preparing its new leaders? The need to do it is becoming urgent. A NALP study of law firm demographics reports that in 2013 there were 22,861 law firm partners. [1] According to *The American Lawyer*, about 16% of partners in the 200 top-grossing law firms are 60 years old or older and more than half of them are at least 65; over the next five years, another 7,000 partners will turn 60. [2] Most of those partners will soon retire or leave their firms and their departures will create a demand for new leaders. Faced with this daunting prospect, many law firms are starting to prepare for leadership transitions.

Some firms already have leadership development programs in place and others are thinking about creating them. These programs usually involve training courses presented by outside faculty. Classroom training is valuable, especially when partners have not learned leadership and management skills as part of their professional education. But trainers may overlook or be unaware of the culture, politics, history and values of your firm. Moreover, classroom work without hands-on learning is not very effective. So good leadership programs also provide external coaches and action learning projects. The best approach, however, with or without a formal program, is to have established firm leaders build the next generation of leaders through mentorship.

Leadership mentoring consists of personalized, one-on-one guidance by a seasoned leader to his or her successor or to one or more new or potential leaders. Leader-mentors may prepare their own successors for a position they now hold, or they may engage in developing leaders for jobs to be determined later. Having leaders groom other leaders is one of the most powerful and effective leadership development tools. It allows the firm to leverage established internal leaders to teach, coach, observe and offer feedback to partners who are moving into new and unfamiliar roles requiring sophisticated leadership skills. Mentor-supported experiential learning has an especially high impact because it is directly and instantly relevant to the new leader's work.

Leader-mentors can do more than teach leadership skills and expand knowledge. They can transfer best practices, stories of lessons learned, insights about firm dynamics, and pragmatic advice and wisdom that can be put to immediate use. By facilitating the transition of partners into challenging new roles, mentors can increase productivity, engagement and morale throughout the firm. While law firms often have a period of guided transition for firm-wide managing partners or chairs, they rarely offer this kind of preparation to office managing partners, practice group leaders, department chairs or lawyers moving into other important leadership roles. Yet "leaders teaching leaders" is an accessible and cost-effective process that is applicable and valuable for all lawyers moving into positions of leadership that they have not held before.

To employ a “leaders teaching leaders” approach, your firm needs a supportive culture, leaders who are good mentors, resources and accountability.

**Firm Culture Must Support Leaders Teaching Leaders.**

In firms where leaders actively develop successors, partners believe it is their obligation to ensure that the firm will have the leaders it will need long after they leave their posts. Rather than feeling burdened or threatened, leader-mentors consider it an honor to mentor new leaders because they have been chosen by the firm not just to lead the firm today but also to prepare the finest possible leaders for tomorrow.

Everyone who holds a leadership position should teach, mentor and guide their successors. But for this to happen, there must be an expectation that current and past leaders will develop and groom the leaders of the future. The philosophy, values and norms of the firm must be clear and consistent about the importance of this leadership development process. If leaders feel insecure about whether they will be valued or rewarded for it, if they distrust the partners who are coming up behind them, if they are threatened by the prospect of sharing their wisdom with possible successors, or if they just don’t care, they will not do it – or they will do it badly.

**Leaders Must Be Competent to Mentor Others.**

It is important for leader-mentors to be partners recognized for their excellence and commitment who are also capable mentors and good role models. This is a very high standard. Many partners do not have the proper skills and information necessary for the job; some partners lack the patience or interest it requires. In some firms, rather than asking all leaders to groom their successors, it may be better to select just the best leader-mentors and have them work with a group of junior leaders. This will reinforce the point that only the best leader-mentors will be invited to teach others (and perhaps spur the excluded leaders to pay more attention to talent development).

Whether you expect all leaders to be mentors or select just a few, identify specific competencies, attributes and other criteria that leader-mentors should have in order to be entrusted with that responsibility. In addition to being a successful and well-regarded lawyer with demonstrated performance as a leader, relevant criteria may include: proven ability to mentor, sponsor and develop others; clear communication skills, including listening and storytelling; a high degree of professionalism; empathy; proficiency in networking, collaboration and team building; and involvement in the community and outside professional activities. In setting your criteria, keep in mind that mentors will need to focus on the future, not just rely on past experience, and that leadership requires being able to cope with fluid situations and shifting contexts. So adaptability, dexterity, openness to change and dealing with uncertainty are also important characteristics for leader-mentors.

In order that emerging women and minority leaders are adequately mentored, be sure that your leader-mentors have a record of developing diverse talent and that they represent a variety of role models. Variety is important to show that different styles and approaches can be successful, not just as to professional behavior but also with regard to work-life choices and extra-professional activities.

### **Resources and Accountability Are Required.**

Unlike leadership training programs, leadership mentoring does not require an outlay of money. But it does require a considerable investment of time – a most precious resource – by busy and productive partners. Also, in order for “leaders teaching leaders” to work well, everyone must be informed about the competencies, activities and experiences the firm expects its leaders to have. Mentors need to understand exactly what knowledge, skills, and abilities leaders need to demonstrate so they can coach, teach and develop emerging leaders in those key areas. They need access to educational programs, training opportunities and learning resources for their own reference and to recommend to those they mentor.

Leader-mentors may also need some coaching to help them learn or refresh their mentoring skills. Because they are experienced partners, this kind of help should be as personalized as possible; any formal program should use a train-the-trainer format. The best approach is to incorporate education in mentoring and other “people development” skills into training given to every new partner so that they learn these skills early and practice them routinely. By the time they become leader-mentors, these skills should be second nature and all they need are reminders or updates.

Assess all partners on their activities in teaching, mentoring, coaching, sponsoring and developing others, especially with respect to leadership talent. Make it a stated part of every leader’s job description, even those who might not be designated as leader-mentors. Ask them to set emerging leader development goals (including targets for developing women and diverse lawyers) for themselves and the groups they lead, and then measure, track and report their efforts to the firm annually. Reward and give recognition to those who do it consistently and well.

### **Conclusion**

Firms that excel at developing leaders are those who provide personalized learning opportunities to new and emerging leaders, utilizing their own experienced leaders as mentors. This approach can help you create a supply of strong, capable leaders at every level to replace the leaders who will retire soon. This is the best way to ensure the firm will have the leaders it needs to succeed and thrive in the future.

## MPF FEATURED ARTICLE

### Your Old Guard is Leaving. Are Your New Leaders Ready to Take Over?

Page Four

---

[1] "The Representation of Women and Minorities Among Equity Partners Sees Slow Growth, Broad Disparities Remain," NALP Bulletin, April 2014, <http://www.nalp.org/0414research>

[2] Aric Press, "Baby Boomers, who are starting to retire, pose serious planning issues for partnerships," The American Lawyer, May 13, 2014, <http://www.americanlawyer.com/id=1202651709860/Your-Boomer-Partners-are-Retiring-Is-Your-Firm-Ready#ixzz3Ey1RxgR3>

###

#### About the Author



#### **Ida Abbott**

Ida Abbott Consulting, LLC

Ida Abbott has been helping employers develop, manage and retain legal talent since 1995. She also serves as a mentor and coach to high achieving individuals seeking professional success. Before starting her consulting firm, Ida practiced law for 20 years, specializing in complex litigation at Heller Ehrman White & McAuliffe, where she also ran the firm's professional development and pro bono programs. She is a Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management and can be reached at 510.339.6883 or [www.IdaAbbott.com](http://www.IdaAbbott.com).