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Grooming the Next Generation

Setting up a successful transition starts early.

Your role is critical to ensuring the day-to-day operations of the firm run smoothly. As your colleagues — or perhaps yourself — near retirement age, there is another essential function you should add to your list: grooming the next generation of legal managers.

Even if retirement is still several years off for you, the time to start mentoring is now. But if this sounds a bit intimidating or not something you’re particularly excited about doing, we’ve got some tips on how to work it into your daily work priorities to ensure a successful transition to your successor.

IT STARTS WITH A PLAN
Don’t wait until you’re a few months, or even a year, away from retirement to begin training. Instead, plan as far ahead as possible and come up with training strategies so that succession goes as smoothly as possible.

“The commitment to succession and ascension is the critical piece,” says Judy Hisson, CLM, PCC, President of Nesso Strategies and Principal of the Legal Leadership Institute. “Identifying the next generation as early as a decade in advance means you can begin transfer of knowledge at a slow and steady pace.”

This training, Hisson says, could include the basic, day-to-day information your legal managers will need to know and transform into more significant information overtime.
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“One specific idea is to schedule frequent casual conversations that offer guidance, discuss nuances and ask lots of good questions of the less seasoned folks that help them identify their style around decision-making and strategic thinking.”

ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION
Whether you’re completing administrative tasks or having important meetings with law firm partners and clients, you need to include the younger legal managers so they can learn from you, according to Andrew R. Taylor, Founder, Director and Chief Executive of Net Lawman.

“The most important aspect of the grooming process is participation,” Taylor says. “Senior employees shouldn’t exclude young blood from being present and participating in various ways. Of course, the level of involvement should be mirrored by the experience of the recruits. Even so, they should have a solid foundation to build from, and their senior colleagues should help with that.”

OUTSIDERS CAN HELP
For years, you’ve been concentrating on your continuing education and career trajectory. Suddenly, you’re responsible for the career growth of younger legal managers as well, which you might not be entirely comfortable with. You may want to suggest to your manager that you’d like to take some training or bring in outside help to assist you. (Don’t forget, ALA has a variety of resources to help: alanet.org/elearning.)

“We often expect seasoned professionals to develop as mentors without [paying] any real attention to it,” says Hissong. “It’s like expecting leaders to be good listeners without attending to their development of that skill. Mentors that are strategic thinkers with a high emotional intelligence will have an easier time of transitioning knowledge. Consider hiring a coach for a couple sessions to focus/hone your succession plan.”

And don’t shy away from suggesting other training for your mentee. Let’s say a younger legal manager is very strong in one area of business management but lacks skills in another.

You should help them identify where they can strengthen their knowledge and provide them with tools for development.

“High potentials with a specific focus in one area of business management might benefit from rounding out their knowledge of other areas — an HR specialist could benefit from finance, technology and marketing knowledge, for instance,” says Hissong.

Another important part of training, according to Hissong, is making sure that younger legal managers are skilled in relationship awareness. Training could involve “reading books on leadership, taking a course (or courses) rooted in self-awareness and other-awareness and choosing a mentor to discuss the challenges they face and how they overcome them,” she says.

SPEAK TO FUTURE LEGAL MANAGERS ON THEIR LEVEL
Baby Boomer and younger legal managers may have the same jobs, but there are differences in how they were trained and how they learn. Krystal Champlin, Law Firm Management Consultant with RJH Consulting, says that the upcoming generation of legal managers has more tech knowledge and less real-world experience than their seasoned counterparts. As a legal manager, it’s up to you to promote the younger generations’ strengths and build upon their weaknesses.

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“By understanding [these generations], seasoned legal managers can use that tech knowledge to carve out creative ways to mentor and groom them into a manager that will fit their firm’s culture,” says Champlin. “To do so, current legal managers should involve them in parts of decision-making and meetings to build their managerial skillset. We can build upon their tech knowledge by teaching them about data-centric management. Additionally, new managers should be trained on the organization’s managerial philosophy and emotional intelligence.”
“High potentials with a specific focus in one area of business management might benefit from rounding out their knowledge of other areas — an HR specialist could benefit from finance, technology and marketing knowledge, for instance.”

MAKE SURE IT’S A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE
Your law firm should be focused on ensuring that employees are having a positive experience on a daily basis. This will make them want to stick around and lead the firm in the years ahead.

“It is important [that] we as legal managers create an environment that promotes personal and professional success and a healthy work culture,” says Champlin. “Studies have shown the happier an employee is, the more productive they are, and it is a direct reflection of the leadership and management within the firm. Remember, leadership starts at the top, and employees, including new managers, will mimic what is modeled.”

LOOK TO THE FUTURE
Along with starting training early, you have to be concerned about the future of your firm and what lies ahead — especially when it comes to your incoming crop of legal managers.

Hissong says that means looking around and seeing what other firms are doing, while at the same time using your strategic lens to consider how your business has (and can create) competitive advantage.

“And that’s beyond the day-to-day management of billing, collections and people,” she says. “The most effective legal managers are concerned about three to five years from now — what will challenge our firm, how are we planning for it today and what do I need to learn to be ready for it — in addition to the tasks and challenges that exist today.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Kylie Ora Lobell is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles. She covers legal issues, blogs about content marketing, and reports on Jewish topics. She’s been published in Tablet Magazine, NewsCred, The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles and CMO.com.

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